A CHANGE OF AIR

KATHARINE FULLERTON GEROULD

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BOOKS BY

KATHARINE FULLERTON GEROULD

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A CHANGE OF AIR

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"I have called you here, my dear friends, to say that I have come to a definite decision as to the disposal of my fortune."

[*Page* 8.

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BY

KATHARINE FULLERTON GEROULD

ILLUSTRATED BY H. J. MOWAT

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ILLUSTRATIONS

"I have called you here, my dear friends, to say that I have come to a definite decision as to the disposal of my fortune" . . . . . *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

"I can't stand the weather. So I am taking your advice. I'm leaving to-night" 96

In a few words, nervous but clear, he put the situation before them 140

Leaven . . . could see from his windows life returning to the world. But within the grayness deepened 204

2130065

A CHANGE OF AIR

I

THE stuffy drawing-rooms were full of people. Some of the group realized the stuffiness, and would have liked more air; some of them were too much overawed to mind an atmosphere that knew how to live with ancestral mahogany. There were those who averted their gaze from the black-walnut "what-not"; there were those who ached with desire of its beauty. There were young eyes that could have appraised to a penny the big royal Bokhara rug in the front room, and watery eyes behind glasses that knew just how much work had gone into the complicated rag carpet before the fire in the room beyond. There was Bessie John,

dressed in well-cut, much-worn tweed, prettily intent on ivory chessmen from the Summer Palace; and old Miss Bean, whose gloveless hands showed the stabs of a thousand relentless needles. Little Julie Fort dangled a German-silver vanity case from her bare left hand and hid her paint-smudged right in a cheap fitch muff. Next her sat Walter Leaven, gaunt, correct, threadbare, with time-stiffened figure and time-eroded face. Young Jim Huntingdon sprawled uncomfortably on the gilt Louis Seize chair to which fate had unkindly led him. Bleached hair and tanned face recorded the onslaught of tropic suns and of winds that acknowledged no human responsibilities. Now and then he threw up his head and snuffed the air uncomfortably, like an animal — panting a little as he sprawled. And others — and yet others — in every variety of attitude, filling the

two great rooms, surging into corners, pressing hard against door-jambs.

Now, at last, the rooms were full. For five minutes the shadowy butler had not introduced a new member to the group. There was little talk, for of this large number of people many found themselves alone among strangers. Even those known to each other were suspicious and silent, for no one knew why he had been summoned. Eager, proud, annoyed, miserable: many qualities of facial expression were there; and all slightly sharpened by resentment. No one would have minded meeting, alone, the rich hostess who had not yet appeared; but this unexplained crowd, like a prayer-meeting or a table d'hôte, was maddening. It savored of sermons or of some abominable charity. Still, they had all responded to the summons, and they waited, unprotesting; for they were all poor. Sometimes

two glances crossed like swords forestalling an insult; but no one got up and went out. The same fact chained them all to their places; and each tried not to realize that this was so. Their relations to Miss Wheaton differed widely. Some had exploited her and some had really loved her, but nothing in the past of any of them — and this feeling was everywhere, like the stuffy air — justified this ruthless association of him with others. These people, while they waited for Miss Wheaton, bristled with individualism; they were half a hundred "special cases," having nothing in common with their fellow guests but the perfectly fortuitous and undeserved circumstance of poverty. There were those there who could, with contentment, have made a quick way to the door, distributing kicks as they went. But no one stirred. Two men — one of them Bessie John's husband — marooned

together on a Sheraton bench between the wall and a door, looked at each other suddenly, an identical phrase in the eyes of each: "If one could only smoke!" But neither uttered a word.

Bessie John gave herself up to futile scorn of a rich woman whose drawing-rooms were furnished as heterogeneously as the Ark was peopled. But she showed her scorn only in her smile, which she directed, with dishonest explicitness, at old Miss Bean. Fortunately Miss Bean's own eyes were resting, fascinated, on Jim Huntingdon. She had a furtive hope that this young giant — whom she did not know — might break the gilt chair on which he sprawled. If he did, she knew a man no one else could possibly know, who could mend it beautifully. To her the catastrophes of the rich were the sole providence of the poor. She was ready to exclaim louder than any one if he did

break it—and then to slip up to Miss Wheaton with the precious address. Miss Bean liked to be useful. Smiles came your way if you were useful; otherwise, never. Stiff on her horsehair sofa, she hated the young man for being there, on the gilt chair. Why should he be there at all? She did not hate Miss Wheaton, who had been kind to her; but she would not have minded—except in humble speech—having the chair break. Some of the others concealed similar meditations deep within them; but with Miss Bean they were very close to the surface. She was so humble that one wheezing manner sufficed to her contacts with life. It was such an ostentatiously unlucky manner that, like rags, it took every one in. Few were so wretched that they were not obliged to pity her. She had probably never before encountered, at the same time, so many natural ene-

mies as this afternoon. But she did not notice them; she was waiting, almost breathless, for the chair to break.

Every one was finally, now, very still. Only Walter Leaven, whose tiny annuity had enabled him to preserve, and not sell, a few priceless affections, grew restless. In spite of his poverty, he would have made a bolt for it if he had not so trusted Cordelia Wheaton.

It was not characteristic of Miss Wheaton to keep her friends waiting; indeed, it was with a phrase of apology that she entered. She took her stand in the uncurtained arch between the two big rooms, refusing the chairs offered her. She was a mass of burdensome soft flesh. Her hand was white like moulded wax; her gentle blue eyes seemed to take reluctant command among features long since conquered, most peacefully, by alien tissue. She looked unhealthy, as fat, white,

small-boned women do; but there was no gross suggestion in her corpulence. It seemed rather the result of pious inertia; of a mystical and unhygienic staring into space for many years. She had apparently not pampered, but ignored, her body. The flesh had achieved a bloodless and unnoticed victory. When she spoke, it was in a small, tinkling voice, not shy, but with absent-minded cadences. Every one paid the most profound attention.

"I have called you here, my dear friends, to say that I have come to a definite decision as to the disposal of my fortune." She paused between phrases, unembarrassed, as if, merely, she had found something that she loved to stare at in the distance, beyond their heterogeneous heads. "I have destroyed my will, under which many — perhaps most — of you were beneficiaries. Some of you have long known that I have no desire to

co-operate with incorporated institutions or public trust funds. I am not in sympathy with the forms which religion takes among us" — there was something breath-taking in her tacit yoking of Walter Leaven's agnosticism and old Miss Bean's revivalistic tendencies; and one or two of her "friends" looked up at her, though they sat very still — "though I would not in any way criticise or interfere. What has become very clear to me is this ——"

As if quite unconscious of the tense minds and bodies surrounding her, she stopped. No one quite dared to follow her glance, to see what she was looking at, there beyond them; but it could in any case have been nothing more remote, physically, than the lace curtains falling heavily the length of the drawing-room windows. Outlying fields of flesh shook slightly as she turned or moved, but there seemed to be no central disturbance.

With rare absence of dramatic sense, she appeared not to know that the moment was cruelly psychologic for twoscore human beings. At last she came back to her speech with a sigh that agitated her vast bosom.

"What has become very clear to me," she resumed, "is that any gift I can make to my friends will be of infinitely more use to them now than at the problematic future period of my death. If any one of you needs — or — or — desires — money that I have and do not either need or desire, I cannot see why I should withhold it any longer. The great and senseless burden of managing a property like mine — though it is not so large at the present day as some have doubtless thought — would scarcely be a burden at all, if shared among so many. I have no natural heirs, and you who are gathered here represent what I should call the

natural people for me to unload my responsibilities upon. I have used my best ability in choosing, and in the distribution of my worldly goods. It is needless to say that I have reserved enough to pursue my own life in self-respect. I hope you will agree with me that self-respect does not need much. But I should not like to burden my friends with the vision of me as a beggar." She smiled softly. "I purpose now, to-day, to divide what has been called my wealth among you here present. I hope no one will give me the pain" — her voice had a pleading note — "of disagreeing with my judgment. It would be a real pain to me. So long as the money is mine, I have, perhaps, a right to judge. After it has ceased to be mine, my connection with it, for praise or blame, will of course utterly have ceased."

Words of abstract import could not be less didactically spoken than were Miss

Wheaton's; gentleness could not go farther compatibly with dignity. Yet even old Miss Bean, who was wont periodically to ask the prayers of singing, groaning, murmuring congregations, felt resentfully that she was being preached at. The women controlled their impatience according to their several codes of manners; the men, except Walter Leaven, squirmed on their seats.

"I am going to ask you, each one, to give me a few moments in my library. My lawyer is there, and together we will inform you of the sum to be transferred immediately to your possession. Any one who wishes to consult my lawyer — Mr. Reid — more fully, can make an appointment with him to-day for a later time. His firm is prepared to execute the transfers, and to do all necessary business with the greatest possible despatch and the least inconvenience to you. Of course, if

you wish to consult your own lawyers, you are at perfect liberty to do so. But as Mr. Reid knows my affairs in detail, I recommend him to you.

"I have made an alphabetical list, and shall ask you to meet me in the library in that order. As I desire now only to give you information, it will not, I think, take long. I purposely selected a holiday for these informal preliminaries. The formalities shall be put through in the next days, at your convenience. Before I call for the first one on the list, may I say one thing: that I should be deeply disappointed if any one of you failed to understand my motives in doing this, or refused to receive my gift?" Her gaze seemed to hover round Walter Leaven's head for an instant, but so vaguely that only Walter Leaven himself could have known. She gave no other sign of singling him out. "I have called you together

only for the sake of saving time. Each one of you, I hope, knows by this time my special feeling of friendliness for him or her — knows that I do not in any way confound him with others. Many of you, of course, do not — never will — know each other. But time is very precious in our time-ridden world. I am leaving the country before long. I do not wish to delay. Miss Bean, your name is first on the list. Will you please come up to the library with me and meet Mr. Reid?"

Miss Wheaton made her way slowly, a little uncertainly, through a group dazed by much swift speculation. Bessie John's husband and the man who shared his Sheraton bench got up to let her through the door. Miss Bean followed, drawing her faded skirts meticulously above her boot-tops, as though she were in a muddy street. Walter Leaven's face twitched a little, as he glanced side-

ways at Jim Huntingdon, now frowning as he sprawled. Leaven was still suppressing the desire to bolt. Bessie John was crimson, but she never let her gaze wander from the ivory chessmen. She did not even look at her husband. Nearly all of them were trying desperately to recall how many of their virtuous desires they had, in times past, permitted Miss Wheaton to become aware of. Both the mannerly and the mannerless were worried: the former lest they should have played the game of decent reticence too well, the latter lest they should have played it disgustingly not at all. Little Julie Fort, whose fitch muff had rolled under Jim Huntingdon's chair, decided, after reflection, that it would look better for her to pick it up and cherish its cheapness. The young giant was too far gone in some revery of his own to help her. His lips were

shaping, inaudibly, strange names, while his closed eyes were dizzily contemplating the detail of an expensive kit.

So it went, while the room slowly emptied itself. As each descended from the library, the shadowy butler led him to the front door and saw that its black-walnut panels swung noiselessly back behind him. But at last the blue November twilight had absorbed them all — all except Walter Leaven, whom the butler, with a murmured word, had led to the dining-room. Walter Leaven heard from the man that Miss Wheaton begged he would stay and presently dine with her; and while he waited in the ugly panelled room, he heard the shuffle of chairs in the drawing-room as the servants rearranged them after the singular festivity. He could have gone back into the thinning crowd, but he did not wish to. Even after old Mrs. Williston,

the last, had gone up-stairs, he still clung to the official privacy of the dining-room. Only when he had heard Mr. Reid go out of the house, did he lift his head and take possession of himself. Then he came out into the hall and met his hostess.

At dinner, Miss Wheaton looked to him very tired. The hanging-lamp over the table made a single Rembrandtesque pool of light in the biggish scene. That illumination showed up the food and dishes like a Dutch still-life. Just beyond the bright centre of the pool Miss Wheaton's face hung heavily between glow and darkness. It looked as if a cynical sculptor had clapped on handfuls of plaster and left them, in their impotence, to harden, while he went about a more beautiful business. Wan and gentle and cruelly fat, she faced her guest across the table, as sometimes—not often—she had

done before. He was oppressed by the weariness she did not confess; and almost immediately after dinner he left her. Some of the men, going away that afternoon, had clicked buoyant heels on the sidewalk: they had walked like men whose limbs have been washed in miraculous waters. But Walter Leaven's step was a little heavier than usual as he sought his two high-perched rooms.

II

JIM HUNTINGDON, gazing out of Walter Leaven's western windows, got a sketchy view of some hundreds of unhappy roofs. Loft buildings of the cheaper sort were plenty; so, too, were window-sills that seemed to sag under the untidy weight of mattresses and bedclothes. It hurt him, all that unpicturesque squalor; hurt him chiefly by the sense of vicarious confinement. His was a roving temper. With little or no æsthetic sense, he disliked having, in spite of himself, to pronounce on either beauty or ugliness. The open precisely suited him. A picture-gallery was scarcely more to his taste than a slum. He liked personal activity: something that he could do, and do on his own. He hated

having either to praise or blame the works of man. Fortunately for him, the planet was still able to provide him with a few unravished stretches.

Yet the young giant had a conscience, and his conscience had brought him to Walter Leaven's door. Walter Leaven, obviously, cared as much for the careful hand of man as young Jim for the careless hand of God: not an object in his sitting-room but was wrinkled with history; and the vast gestures of Nature could have had nothing to do with the meticulous etching of his face. All the same, Walter Leaven was the only one of the company which, a week before, had gathered in Miss Wheaton's house, to whom Jim Huntingdon felt he could go. The two men had barely met before that day; but Jim Huntingdon, looking for some one he could talk to, had selected Leaven.

"What is it?" asked the older man at last.

Huntingdon turned from his staring. He couldn't for the life of him see *what* it was. Only, something had to be discussed, with somebody, before he could get off.

"I don't know any of those people," he began. "I've never seen Miss Wheaton often. I don't even know what I was doing there with the rest of you, except that she knew my mother once. I used to see her a lot when I was a kid. But, Lord, that's long ago. Only — well, it amounts to this. I can't cut my stick without making sure. I've at least spoken to you before, and, by George, I don't believe I've even spoken to most of the others. Is it all right for me to go ahead?"

"Go ahead?"

"Yes. What is all this extraordinary

idea of her staking us, anyhow? As man to man, have I got a right to this windfall? Or is she crazy, and is something going to happen? The lawyer says not, but I don't know anything about lawyers."

"I think she explained herself sufficiently to us all that afternoon." There was a discernible bitterness in Leaven's tone.

"I don't call that explaining. I never took anything from a woman before. I don't know if it's right. I've got to ask some one of the bunch, and the rest were no good. You've got to tell me."

"I can tell you nothing whatever."

"Well, I can't see *her*. I've tried. She's always out or engaged. Besides, it's awfully uncomfortable. I've taken the money, of course, but I can't start off without knowing. I'd be in a hell of a hole if I got ten thousand miles away

and then had to refund. Besides — why should she give me anything?"

"You will have to answer that yourself."

"Do you believe" — the young man twisted uncomfortably on his sofa — "that any of those other people are in my queer position? Not knowing any more than a dumb animal *why?* If I thought that, I'd finish up my business and start."

"I am quite in the dark — quite in the dark." Leaven fiddled with a bit of enamel. "But I honestly think you may take it from me, as an old friend of Cordelia Wheaton's, that you're safe. You may go and be happy in your own peculiar way, without worrying. That is, if —" He stopped.

Miss Wheaton's beneficiaries were of many stripes and colors; they were to work their luck into a score of different

patterns; some of them were to know each other well, others never to meet again. Only one decision would they all, as by a single gesture, make: not one of them would ever tell or ask another, "How much?" Imprisoned together in her charity, each would, to the end, have that little private cell to flee to.

"Oh, I can be happy," Huntingdon hastened to say, "if it's all right."

"I don't like to take any responsibility in the matter," the older man answered; "but I see no reason why you should hesitate. You are lucky, I think, to know what you want to do with your windfall."

Jim Huntingdon grinned happily. "Don't you?"

"No, I don't." There was, again, bitterness in Leaven's tone. But somehow all the bitterness seemed vicarious, as if he were complaining for a friend.

"Oh, it's easy enough to spend money."

"I dare say. But it has come rather late to me. I'm used to my life."

"You can always buy this sort of thing." By way of indication, the young giant's fist nearly knocked over a piece of majolica.

"Yes, I can always do that." Leaven seemed to be waiting for his guest to go.

"Well, so long." Huntingdon crossed to the door. There he turned. "I suppose I'd feel better about it if I knew what she was going to do. Won't she be everlastingly sorry some day?"

"You attribute to me a familiarity with Miss Wheaton's mind that I do not possess."

Jim Huntingdon never reacted to stiffness. He merely got away from it as quickly as possible. So he turned the knob of the door. "Impertinence is not

my habit," he assured Leaven gravely. "Only I wish to heaven somebody knew something. But as there doesn't seem to be anything I can do, I'll take my passage to-day. I'd have been a lot happier, though, if some one could have assured me that that poor old lady was happy."

Walter Leaven smiled at his departing guest. "You may take it from me that she thinks she's happy. I give you my word on that. Good luck to you. I suppose you have an address?"

"Oh, yes. It'll probably be some bank in Shanghai. Would you like it?"

"Yes."

"I'll send it to you. Good-bye." And his host heard him descend the stairs with a comfortable Brobdingnagian stride.

Left to himself, Leaven sank back into a worn and rickety chair. The bit-

terness that young Huntingdon had excited in his breast now took control there, and his fine, hard, weary features showed his mood. For many reasons he had hated answering the young adventurer's questions, but he paid Huntingdon the compliment of believing him a rare case. He did not, in his mind's eye, see any of the others looking askance at their luck. Their palms would be greedy while their lips were scornful. He was rather glad that he had asked for Huntingdon's address. Shanghai, to his Europe-moulded mind, sounded fantastic. Still, undoubtedly, there was a bank there; and he could even fancy Huntingdon, fresh from all the places that made maps absurd, asking an impassive Chinaman for letters. He respected Huntingdon for his scruples because they were akin to his own. He had lulled the other's scruples, while he

let his own have full play — because he felt, with such passion as was left to him, that he alone had a right to them. It was late in the day for Walter Leaven to be jealous, and his jealousy was of an odd and faded kind. It consisted only in wishing to be alone in worrying about Cordelia Wheaton. He did not pretend, even in this twilight of age that might well make their two landscapes so similar, to understand her. But he liked to think that he alone of them all could see danger ahead of the woman he had loved. Other people, knowing what he did, might think her a fool; but none of them — save him — would regret her folly.

Love was past; but he remembered it, as he remembered the Italy of his ardent wanderings. Rome was spoiled now, people told him; Cordelia Wheaton had certainly become a figure of little charm. Yet he wouldn't, for very pride,

go back on his past. In self-respect he must maintain that the only emotions he had ever had had been justified. Italy had been a marvel; Cordelia had been slim and sweet and noble. Both had been reft from him, and now he had no resource but to believe that, in his day, he had loved all too wisely. Life had been a beast to him, but he would lie to life brazenly on his very death-bed, pretending that what he had had was something crude possession could hardly have bettered. He could see life go out of the door, a disappointed shrew. That would precisely suit him and the narrow range of his shrunk emotions.

Walter Leaven had a sense of humor. He kept it by him like some very ugly, very convenient object. If you can imagine a connoisseur finding a patent rocker comfortable, and having the rare audacity to admit it, you can guess

Walter Leaven's attitude to his sense of humor. He sat in his rocker and looked at his masterpieces. At first it had been only another way of showing deliberate disrespect to life; but eventually he had come to like his rocker. . . . It was because he could see how absurd was Cordelia Wheaton's present theory of existence that he worried about her.

He had, all these last years, suspected that Cordelia was making a mystical fool of herself, but she had said little to him, on the rare occasions when he had seen her. Only at that last dinner she had shared with him had she let him have it straight — as straight as one could let you have any dim nonsense of the sort. He didn't know where she had got it: she didn't tell him. But of course there were always futile sophistications ready to the hand of the rich. There was religion in her impoverishing

herself, but it was a religion with no æsthetic value. One of those queer things out of the East, bound up with charlatans and flatulent illiteracy. A state of mind that rejected the concrete; that would, if it consented to look at it, have deplored the Renaissance! Cordelia was by way of denying her body, and the humanist in him would have preferred cosmetics and masseuses. Life, wishing to make him squirm in his patent rocker, had shown him the woman he had loved turned — what was the ridiculous thing? — Buddhist. They did that sort of thing, he knew, in Boston; but they did it temporarily — they didn't burn their boats. It didn't go beyond vegetarianism and housing impostors in turbans. He could have stood it as a fad; but Cordelia had already disposed of her fortune; she was going to India, or Tibet, or Ceylon, or some such place, to finish

her days contemplating the Infinite. At least, he supposed it was the Infinite — he had refused to listen to the jargon. Cordelia was sweet, was dignified, was reticent about it; but that was what it amounted to. She would grow fatter and fatter until she couldn't move, until she was just a mystic stare out of a heap of flesh. And all the time, if she could only have seen it that way, there was Rome: a great hospital, equipped to receive any kind of case, even hers. That was all he knew, and he knew more than any one else. He was too sore to think of it as a brave gesture on her part; and he knew well that giving your life for a cause does not prove the worth of the cause. Cordelia would perish for something whose sole sense was to make an article in an encyclopædia. And he, enriched, must watch her perish: the woman who had been slim, sweet, and

noble, and whom he had never asked to marry him for reasons she was perfectly aware of. Walter Leaven "believed" nothing; but he could have borne a bigotry that had been responsible for Fra Angelico. When he came to think of it, the absence of bigotry was the most disgusting thing about Cordelia's revelation.

His knowledge of her religion was sketchy, but his sense of it had become vivid. He saw it as something too vast and vaporous to be quite decent. It was a great mist reeking; in it moved gods of prehistoric countenance, mopping and mowing with mile-wide grins. His own agnosticism had at least the cleanness of the void. Her revelation had nothing to say to humanity; it denied all passion, even the purest, all codes, even the noblest. There were in it none of those choices that justify the

soul. Life, any life — snake or man — it held indecent, a thing to be got rid of. Their saints gazed at their own navels and were dumb. Ugh!

No wonder he had been unhappy when he left her house on that momentous evening. All Cordelia's life had been a tacit refusal of his unspoken offer of himself, but he had never felt really jilted until now. And it was too late to glorify another woman; too late, even, to fling himself ironically into ignoble adventures. His blood was thin, his ardors ran low; he wanted nothing, not even enough disgust to shock him back into his illusions. Only that morning he had signed a new lease for his two inconvenient rooms. He had walked past his tailor's three times before deciding to go in and order a suit he sorely needed. For two days he had been deliberating over having a telephone in-

stalled. He thought he might run to that, but he hesitated, in spite of himself, to make so lavish a gesture. Perhaps Huntingdon's visit had tinged the air with venturesomeness. At all events, half an hour after Huntingdon had left him, Leaven got up, put on his overcoat, and started out for the office of the telephone company. At the same time he resolved inwardly to buy another book of meal-tickets at his dreary boarding-house. No one can say what Walter Leaven feared, or why; but he crept further into his familiar frugality as if menaced by deadly guns.

III

BESSIE JOHN sat on a step-ladder, mocking her florid husband.

"You are as glad as I am, you know you are. Haven't we always wanted to be civilized? And aren't we doing it discreetly? Aren't we hanging our own pictures? If I had been the offspring of frivolity and extravagance that you think me, wouldn't I have paid the people from Crantz's to do it all? Am I not throwing sops all the time to Cerberus? Have I urged you to give up your work? Did I set up a butler when I was sore tempted? Have I even yet been to a *good* dressmaker? Did I not say to you in an Old Testament voice: 'Philip, Philip, they must be real antiques, against the day when we may

have to sell them'? Did I not curb my taste for Louis Quinze and Chinese Chippendale, and sally into lone and dangerous farmhouses, buying the four-post bed from under the hired man and the decrepit mahogany from under the boiled dinner? Have I not been as clever as a mendicant and as shrinking as a criminal? Colonial I have forced myself to be — though it's not worthy of me; but Braun photographs upon my walls I will *not* have. There is a point beyond which rolling in the mud is not Christian humility but sheer swinishness. And, above all, Philip of my heart, have I ever for one moment, since luck came, gone back on my manners? 'The Lord our God is a jealous God'; and I have every day tried to prove to Him that luck is good for my soul. I haven't wrestled in prayer — it isn't my way — but I have meant to show that adversity

isn't the best and only teacher. Adversity, you know, always spoke Greek, as far as I was concerned. I was getting near the point of collapse. I didn't so much mind eating off fumed oak and sitting in Mission chairs — though they were very uncomfortable — as I did pretending to a lot of people that I liked fumed oak and Mission chairs, and chafing-dishes, and the brassware of Russian Jews. Yet I could never say, even to the Orpingtons, that I hated it all. I somehow couldn't. It's one thing you don't do. Yes, I was in revolt. I wouldn't even be cheerful, and go in for wicker. That would have been to accept our fate, finally; worse still, to pronounce ourselves optimists.

"No, Philip dear, I have behaved very well. I have been very grave about it — almost as grave as you. I haven't danced up and down, and I have made

more concessions to your conscience and your gloom than you will ever know about. If I can't help thanking God that I shall never again have to sleep in a white enamelled bed, do you blame me? And you can't say I have gone in for anything *chic*. I don't particularly like Colonial furniture: I have a soul above it. But I realize that it's respectable, that one needn't be ashamed of it, that it's not ostentatious; and you can't say that our drawing-room mightn't have been a New England sea-captain's front parlor. It's built round Miss Wheaton's chessmen. That was why I asked for them instead of something more valuable. Given the chessmen, I could reconstruct. Did you know that old Miss Bean lugged off the what-not? Do you think I ought to have wrested it from her, and built round that?"

Philip John, fair, handsome, his grave boy's face verging on heaviness, looked up at his wife.

"I know you hated it all," he said simply. "I don't blame you. I've no vocation for knock-down furniture, myself. I'm glad, too — of course I am. I suppose it's superstitious of me, but I somehow thought we'd better go slow. The price of the engravings nearly knocked me over. We can afford them, but ought we to? Isn't it sinking too much of our principal in personal property?"

"But after this we can live on our blessed income, my precious. Oh, you'll see. I shall count every penny of your salary, just the same. Can do. Believe me."

Philip John sat down in a comfortable wing-chair and gazed upward at his wife.

"Is it all going just for food and clothes and things?"

Bessie John leaned her chin in her hand and spoke in a deep, low, chanting voice. "He wants to give to the poor; he wants to take a pew in church; he wants to insure his life; he wants to chip bits off his salary and run by stealth to the savings-bank with them; he wants to work overtime at the office, and to put antimacassars on all the chairs; he wants never, never, never to take a taxi, but always to ride in the subway!" She sang the last phrase softly, ending on a minor third.

"My dear girl, you know perfectly well what I mean. And it wouldn't hurt us to give something to the poor."

Bessie John came down from the step-ladder and stood by the chimney-piece, with folded arms.

"Pilly-Winky, it would hurt me. I've

done all I care to do for the poor. I've *been* poor. You can't do more for them than to live as they do. Even settlement-workers get a day off now and then. It's many a year since I've had a day off. No, Pilly-Winky, not the poor. It all goes into administration expenses, anyhow. I'm always willing to give candy to a baby, but I draw the line at subscriptions to anything. Any personal charity I feel like expending is going to be expended, for a long time to come, on you. Understand? You're the most deserving person I know."

She crossed to him and put her hands on his shoulders, gripping him hard. Her voice matched her gesture. "Nor yet a pew in church, my dear. I praise God in my own way. I'm not going to set up as a churchgoer just because I can have clothes that the usher would be polite to. When I think of it, the

thing I admired most about Miss Wheaton was her absence of cant. She wasn't dying to support religion. She preferred to support individuals that she pitied, liked, or respected. She disposed of her money quietly, decently. If she had wanted it used for indiscriminate charity, she would have given it that way, wouldn't she? Or if she had wanted to hold up the hands of the church? She preferred to give you and me a chance to be almost as nice as we really are. And I honor her for it."

"So do I, my dear." His gravity matched her soft vehemence. "But she at least didn't think it right to use all her wealth in pampering herself. She parted with it. She gave it — you may say — to us."

"And that is where it is going to stay." Bessie John gave him a last little shake, then sat down facing him. She

crossed her slim hands behind her head and swung her left foot.

"Pilly-Winky, I honestly wouldn't criticise if you really had a passionate desire to support some particular good work. Tuberculosis hospitals, vacations for working girls, lost dogs, or a Keeley cure for hoboes. What I object to is your uncomfortable sense that because you have something, you must part with it; because you have a little more, you must straightway have a little less. That's mere atavism. Your ancestors got in the way of making themselves uncomfortable for the glory of God. Then, in the sixties, they made *my* ancestors uncomfortable for the glory of God. They were horrid people, your ancestors, from the start. Comes of reading Hebrew instead of Greek, I shouldn't wonder. But I am not going to squat on Plymouth Rock because I

married you, darling. If Colonial furniture is going to remind you of your ancestors at every turn, I'll sell it to-morrow and be *chic*. Really *chic*. I could do it beautifully, and you'd mind it awfully. So be good."

"I'll be good. But ——"

She threw up her hands, then passed them with a firm, rhythmic gesture over her sleek, dark hair.

"'But' — nothing. I do think we might leave the ducks and drakes to other people. Miss Wheaton's money is going to go in very queer ways. Let *us* be conventional and decent and charming. Let us soberly show ourselves quiet, civilized, old-fashioned people. In the end, I fancy we shall show up better than any of the others."

"Can you be old-fashioned?" he laughed.

"Can I not? Look at this room."

"Oh, that!"

"It's important. I made it with my eyes open. It's of the last *bourgeoisie;* and I am going to be *bourgeoise* with the best. I am going to do my duty in that state of life, etc. I am going to be exactly what I should have been if I had grown up in the house just as it stands. I am going to be a good citizeness. And I am going to practise the fine archaic virtue of not attempting either to shock the world or to reform it. I've given my wild imaginings a hypodermic. I am going to be a nice little vertebra in the backbone of the nation; a happy country with no history; a fine old Sheffield teapot; a traditional American according to the Indiana school of novelists."

"And I?"

"You were all those things in the beginning. I have made a moral choice.

Therefore I am more to be admired than you."

"Oh, granted. But will you get the admiration?"

"Irony sits ill on you, Philip. No, I shall not get it. I shall only sit at home and deserve it in vain. But in the long run I shall be seen not to have lost my head — like some of the others."

"What others?"

"Some of the dear old madwoman's beneficiaries. Most of them, of course, we don't know; but the few we do, seem to have lost their heads already. Do you know what Julie Fort did? Spent hundreds of dollars on clothes and sailed for Europe — there to pursue her career."

"She paints, doesn't she?"

"There used always to be paint on her fingers, so I suppose she does. The last time I saw her, all the paint was

on her face. Yes, she paints. . . . But I don't think art is going to be her career."

"What do you mean?" Philip John looked shocked.

"I mean that Julie Fort has read and talked nothing but poison for five years. I think, Philip of my soul, that she is destined to queer adventures. In fact, I think she has gone to look for them. Now you can't say my idea isn't better than that."

"Oh, come, Bess."

"My dear, I don't *know*. But I have heard Julie talk. And I have seen some of her crowd. She's the adventuress type, that's all. Some very queer people, I fancy, will share her fortune with her."

"Couldn't you have talked to her?"

"Do you imagine I care what Julie does? I am interested only in proving

to you that I'm not the least decent of that miserable company which hung on Miss Wheaton's words. No, not excluding old Mrs. Williston, whom I used to call 'Aunt Blanche,' and never will again."

"Why not?"

"Because she has enough real nieces to domineer over, now."

"Aren't you hard on her? I thought she was rather a poor dear."

"She is not a poor dear; she is a rich dear. For years she has lived with a married niece and the married niece's large family. Now the married niece is living with her. It's the same house, the same large family; but Mrs. Williston controls them all. 'Aunt Blanche' used to have a hall bedroom on the third floor; 'Mrs. Williston' has the second-story front, and the nephew-in-law goes out of an evening — to the Y. M. C. A.,

I suppose. I don't think she would let him set up a club."

"Aren't you uncharitable?"

"I am not. I went there yesterday to pay her my last call. She was magnificent in bugles and real lace, and as I entered the throne-room I heard her ask a quite good-looking great-nephew if he couldn't give up cigarettes for Christ. I heard him say he would — but he also said 'damn' in the hall. 'Damn' is no word for a boy of sixteen to use, and I slipped him a dollar as I went in."

"Cigarettes won't do him any good at that age."

"Of course not. But could I have him jeopardizing the prospects of the entire family by exploding then and there? And a dollar's worth won't hurt his health permanently. If she thinks he *has* given up cigarettes for Christ, she may let him alone for a little while —

give him time to get his second wind. I had no time to talk to him."

"Did he take the money?"

"He fairly lapped it out of my hand. I've known him a long time. He waited for me on the street-corner and told me that they have to play games with the old horror and cheat themselves so as to let her win. No, I don't regret the dollar. If I managed to give any one in that household any happiness that that old hypocrite can't blight, it was all to the good. Next best to that was making her miserable. That wasn't easy — she's so puffed up with prideful godliness — but I did my modest best. I think we shall cut each other hereafter."

"Was that in your newly adopted tradition?"

"Oh, my dear, I have to give *my* ancestors some show. Otherwise, I'd break down. This woman is a mighty influence

for evil. She radiates unclean piety. After I had made it quite clear that I wouldn't subscribe to any of her funds for putting strait-jackets on the wrong people, she turned to vilifying Miss Wheaton. Said she had taken to some outlandish religion — was no better than a heathen. I suggested to Mrs. Williston that she use some of Miss Wheaton's money for a special missionary to reconvert Miss Wheaton. But I honestly think she prefers to consider her irreclaimable. I even asked if she wouldn't find the sempstress — Miss Bean, you know — an invaluable coadjutor in her good works, now that the old thing is a leisured woman."

"You seem to have done the thing up brown. What did she do?"

"My dear"— Bessie John's voice shook — "Mrs. Williston is a snob, I fear. And I regret to say that old Miss

Bean has joined the Holy Rollers — if you know what they are. It didn't go at all. So I did. And now the step-ladder must be removed, and we must dress for dinner."

The two got up simultaneously; Mrs. John's account had brought laughter into the air, yet Philip John's laughter was nervous and quickly spent. His wife, seeing it, came over to him and rested her hand on his shoulder.

"You don't trust me to turn into the right kind of person?"

He put his arm round her, but did not meet her eyes. "You've always been precisely the right kind of person, Bess. I suppose it's all right."

"You may be sure it's all right." She laid her cheek against his arm and looked steadily away from him at a dark old highboy. "Nothing can be wrong while I admire you as I do. And

for the first time in my life I am permitting myself to hope — to *hope*, do you understand, Philip? — that we may have sons in your likeness. That is another difference that Miss Wheaton is going to make."

Philip John stood tongue-tied an instant in the twilight. Then he crushed his wife to him, looming above her, enfolding her, her slim form vanishing utterly in his embrace. Still tongue-tied, he let her go, caught up the step-ladder like a negligible thing, and carried it out of the room.

Bessie John walked to the big window and looked out into the gloom. "I might have known I needn't worry," she whispered to herself. "I had the ace of trumps all the time. I might panel the nursery with teak, so long as it was a nursery. There's not a man in the world, I believe, who won't fall for that.

And it's not a defeat for me, either" — her words came so low that she could scarcely hear them herself —"for I chose Colonial, and it goes, heaven knows, with that!"

Like any other verbalist, Bessie John felt better when she had summed a thing up, even under her breath and in solitude. She passed quickly out of the room by another door, and up-stairs.

IV

JULIE FORT looked athwart pink curtains at the slanting rain. She was disappointed in the weather, and the pink silk cried out upon her hopes. She had wanted a day as cheaply cheerful as the curtains; a day with no implications or responsibilities, a day that led you nowhere, that bore no relation to fact. Of the heady cup of the times, Julie had drunk only the froth; the real juice of the grape had never reached her lips. She had, despite Bessie John's opinion, no ideas; but her nostrils and her palate had been stung by the effervescence of the wine. Her attitude to life was the by-product of all that ferment. Julie had demanded social regeneration (along startling lines) as

loudly as any of the sisterhood to which she had, somewhat ignorantly, belonged; though for their violent logic she cared little, and of it understood nothing. The "crowd" suffered her because she was pretty, was good-tempered, was on her own, was clever with her brush. Most of them never knew that she was drifting morbidly. When the other girls demanded the ballot, Julie demanded it, too; but what she really wanted was a chance to do a lot of things her mother would have died of her doing, without paying the price. She was by no means vicious: she merely hated the sense of bonds. She had absolutely no power of discerning essentials, and her characteristic demonstration against conservatism would probably have been to smoke a cigarette in church. It certainly would have had no more sense than that. She read all the young English novelists,

and gathered from them that lust is more than half of love. Bernard Shaw would have been pained, though probably not surprised, to know what she inferred from some of his best paradoxes. She knew that the world was vastly different from the world of gentle conceptions out of which, five years before, her mother, Cordelia Wheaton's girlhood friend, had opportunely faded. It was a world in which you could kick your heels and be respected for it. Her group had good hygienic reasons for kicking your heels: it was the best exercise possible for the body politic. Julie kept under cover of those reasons — which she never understood — and kicked hers ecstatically. Most of her friends railed at bonds of any sort, austerely, on principle, without desire. Julie objected to bonds precisely as she objected to stays, which she never wore.

It is a question whether her "crowd" would have put up with the brainless youth of her if she had not had the uncanny gift of caricature. Women seldom make good caricaturists. It was as unnatural, as masculine of her, as it would have been to be a good mechanic. Moreover, the gift suggests brains, a sense of humor, convictions — all sorts of things that Julie had not. She simply knew like a shot what could be done with the line. She saw the implicit grotesqueness of all faces, and her hand never went back on her.

When Miss Wheaton, for the sake of lavendered memories, enriched Julie Fort, the girl gave out to her friends that she was going to Paris. No one, of course, had a word to say. People who paint or draw always go to Paris if they can. Her friends were as conventional about that as the generation before

them. They feasted Julie, and Julie feasted them — talking very little, but sketching them with her wicked pencil while they ate and drank and laughed. The sketches were preserved in almost every case; though Paul Rennert, slightly drunk, made a solemn pilgrimage, after the party broke up, to the East River, and flung his portrait into the muddy water. Paul cared nothing for Julie's gift, though he had the sense to be insulted by what she had done with his face, but he took Julie herself very seriously. So did André Henkel; and he has Julie's portrait of him to this day, framed in his study. Both men wanted her: in such different ways that it is hard to use the same verb to express it. André has got on since those days, making his mark: witness the walls on which the smudged caricature hangs. But Julie could not foresee André, or

wait through the long cantos for his success in the twentieth book. André himself saw early that she moved in anapæsts, and would be a fragment finishing in suggestive asterisks. Miss Wheaton, moving among her memories, had foreseen nothing. Bessie John had come nearer it than any one else, but even Bessie was handicapped by her new vision of life. Mentally she cast Julie from her before she took time to understand. Julie went on the scrap-heap along with the Mission furniture.

It was characteristic of Julie that she never, for an instant, contemplated investing her little capital, and living on the income thereof. She planned, instead, to use up her principal slowly, but relentlessly. Anything might come round the corner; she had a gift; meanwhile she was avid of the present. Life for a little should be as gay as she could make

it. She would work; but just enough to give zest to her fun. Julie went at the matter of living, those first months in Paris, in the corrupted temper of the æsthete. Most of the young people she frequented worked without a sure knowledge of where next year's (if not next month's) rent would come from. Julie was grateful to be lifted above them in this matter. Sordid suspense had no place among the condiments she craved. She preserved her faculty of fear for finer uses, all emotional. Julie intended to encounter Life in Paris. She was young enough to spell it with a capital letter, and reckless enough to greet the Rubicon — that small and muddy stream — with a cheer.

To-day she stamped her foot at the rain. Gold in her purse had made her impatient of delays. She had bought, in six months, so many hitherto inacces-

sible things, it irritated her that she could not buy sunlight. There was nothing to do with Paul Rennert when he came. Together they had exhausted all the resources of her studio. There was not a new thing to do in it, not a new place to sit, not a new festivity to invent. The romance of Paul's having followed her across the Atlantic had grown a little stale. She intended to use him again and yet again; she did not intend to drop him until she had squeezed him dry. Julie's mind was not large, and, as I have said, her mental motions were jerky. A woman who at any given moment held more of the future in her hands would have looked beyond Paul Rennert, if only because he had belonged with her in New York; would have prepared, slowly, another drama for herself, finding totally new characters for the totally different scene.

All that Julie had accomplished was to cease to be afraid of him. In New York he had always frightened her. Now she had far more money than he, though Paul had been the moneyed one of their indigent group. Once or twice, here in Paris, she had lent him a hundred francs. She did not know how it would be, between them, in the end. But she must get through with Paul before she went on. And of course some time she must get back to work. She had given away, as mementos, things she could have sold; liking the praise, liking the pose of the rich amateur. But what should she do with Paul to-day? He could not take her to Meudon as they had planned. The evening could be managed; but the people they knew worked in the daytime. None was such an idler as Julie. Delicious not to be mounting the stairs of editorial offices; delicious to wear ex-

pensive clothes. But what — oh, dear Lord in heaven — what to *do?* Even if she had felt like sending Paul away and working on the rue de la Paix series, she could not, for sheer spite, have so acquiesced in the weather. Julie would have stuck out her tongue in all seriousness at Atropos. And Paul Rennert was late. He should — she rather felt — have been bemoaning the rain on her stairs an hour before she condescended to get up.

Rennert came at last. He gave three knocks, and Julie opened to him. To spite the weather (for she wasted time on these impotent gestures) she had dressed for the storm, and Rennert found homespun where he had expected to be confronted with a kimono.

"Ready for Meudon?" he grinned.

"Damn Meudon!" Julie swore, of course: they all did. But she did it con-

scientiously and badly, and Rennert discouraged it.

"Don't!" he sighed. "Would a cigarette help?"

"No," said Julie. "I've smoked too long and too much, as you know. They're a habit; they're not a comfort. I'm so bored I could scream — and this *is* the dullest town!"

Paul Rennert wrinkled his dark face. "Depends — I like it, in fair weather or foul. But of course you ——"

"Well? I? Go on."

"Oh, nothing, my child." Seated on a couch, he cleaned a pipe elaborately. "Only you know you are neither one thing nor the other. How can you expect to be happy?"

"Meaning ——?"

"Well, meaning this." He sucked at his pipe exhaustively, and finally lighted it. "You don't work. And you don't

play. You muddle along. You don't know what you want."

"I do."

"No, you don't. You couldn't tell me before I counted ten. You see, you don't really care about your work. You've no morals, of any sort."

"I am still bored." Julie regarded him ominously.

"Sorry. But it's true, so you oughtn't to be bored. You could do stunning things, if you'd put your nose to the grindstone. But you never will. You'll dash off little things that make us weep with joy, but you won't tackle anything that would mean trouble. So we have to count you out on the serious side. You haven't got any long hopes and vast thoughts — not one."

"My work's my own affair. That rue de la Paix series is going to be ripping."

"You've said so for three months."

"That's my affair," she repeated sharply. "But a series of satiric sketches, however good, can't be the whole of life. I want to be amused. I want to be interested. I want to live."

"Well" — Paul Rennert looked away from her at an Empire desk he had helped her to buy — "you aren't in love with any one. And except for love *or* work, you can't expect to be amused."

"I would rather die than marry," said Julie listlessly.

"Who said 'marry'? Do you see any black silk stock round my neck? I mean, you've never had a big emotion. All very pretty and sweet of you, but what do you expect? You can't be inside and outside at the same time. I do my best, but on my word, Julie, you're hard to suit."

"What do you mean by your best?"

"Stage-managing this children's pan-

tomime you call your life. How you expect me to get results — ! You seem to think that if you live without a chaperon, you have fulfilled all the requirements of drama."

"You mean I ought to get up an affair with some one? Like Aline and her little Russian? Thanks. When I see a man I like well enough ——"

"You see plenty of men you like well enough," Rennert replied coolly. "But you don't want to. I can't make a grand passion drop on you out of the blue, can I?" He watched her profile very closely as he spoke. "Quite right, doubtless. Only, if you won't give the passion that's in you either to work or to any human relation, why blame me — or Paris? If I were you, I'd go home and get brought out in society."

"Thank you. But, somehow, it doesn't even amuse me to be insulted."

"I don't insult you unless for your good. You've got to buck up, Julie."

"Would you guarantee me success if I took up with one of these men?"

Paul Rennert rose and drummed on the window-pane with his fingers. He spoke only when he had achieved the correct shade of weariness.

"Oh, Julie, you have a rotten mind."

Julie Fort flushed at this. "I face facts. I call a spade a ——"

"You call a spade a muck-rake. You don't seem to think of other conceivable uses for it. As for facing facts — you've never faced one in your silly life." Paul Rennert had faced facts — perhaps not always in the most admirable temper — but to that extent he felt himself better than Julie.

"I've had hard times." She was plaintive.

"Yes — you have. But you've never

been really hungry. You've only eaten bad food instead of good."

"Is it your idea that I must starve my way to a soul?"

"Not a bit of it. Only, so far as I see, you don't get any real fun out of your money — any more than if you were a fashionable nobody. You haven't bought a single real thing with it yet."

"Clothes are real." Julie passed her hand over the rough surface of her skirt.

Paul Rennert brought his fist down upon the sill. "No, they're not! Not the way you use them. You stop at making yourself pretty."

"Isn't that good in itself?"

"As far as it goes. But you don't think, do you, that a pretty woman was made to be looked at from a distance? If it never goes farther than that, she hasn't accomplished anything."

"Yet you say I have a rotten mind!"

"I wouldn't mind your being shocked if you *were* shocked, you know," he threw in. "But of all the amorphous, anomalous creatures — Why do we bother with you, I wonder? Because you're pretty, and because the big *couturière* in your rue de la Paix series is as good as Hogarth." He began irrelevantly to whistle.

The taste of the sugar on her tongue was presently sweet to her, as he had known it would be.

"I might stay at home and work on the Mormon millionaire." But there was no muscle of intention in her flabby phrase.

"Then I'll get along. Sorry about Meudon. Some other day." He gathered himself for departure.

"Stop!" Julie rested her clever hands

on her slender hips and faced him. "I shall scream if you leave me here with nothing to do."

"You'll scream if I stay."

"Yes, I shall."

"I'm going to get out. You'd be tiresome, screaming."

"Oh" — she turned from him — "isn't there anything we can *do?* Anything we can *buy?*"

Paul Rennert laughed grimly. "Not with your money."

She might have retorted; but it was of the essence of her feeling for him that she did not, in any vulgar way. "What's the matter with my money? If you had known old Cordelia Wheaton, you'd know it wasn't tainted."

"It's tainted by the way you use it."

"In heaven's name, what have I done with it?"

"That's just it. You haven't done

anything. What's money for, except to mock the stars with?"

"Will money buy weather?"

"Yes — if it's expended to that end."

Julie looked at Rennert in sheer wonder. She was sometimes slow in the uptake. He returned her gaze very steadily for a moment, but turned away when he saw that his meaning was penetrating her brain.

"Paris — Lyon — Méditerranée," said Julie very slowly. Then she, too, turned away.

"Well" — Paul Rennert shrugged gallically — "what's money for? You can't buy weather at Cartier's; but you can go where the weather suits you. That's mocking the stars, if you like."

Julie Fort was silent.

"Why does it shock you?" he asked, after an interval. "Nothing could be more conventional than going to the Riviera when Paris is dreary."

"And you call that mocking the stars?"

Hands in his pockets, head tilted back, he looked at her.

"As near it as you'll ever get — with your ideas. Sportier, anyhow, than sticking on where you're bored. It's a gesture, at least."

"What do you know about my ideas?"

"Everything I've already told you."

She liked him very much: better than any of the new people; better than any of the future acquaintances she — not very clearly — foresaw. It spoke for the conventionality in Julie which Rennert taunted her with, that she liked him the better because he reeked of "home." She liked him, indeed, well enough for anything. His cool, dark face, his breadth of shoulder and slimness of waist, his easy insolence, which had no taint of mere male condescension: all these spoke

to her nerves — nerves that in Julie and her kind were the modern substitute for sentiment.

"My dear Paul, you seem to think I ought to throw my bonnet over the windmill."

"My dear Julie, there are no bonnets any more, and no windmills."

"No, of course not," Julie replied loyally. For the young of our day run mad over formulæ, and Paul Rennert had just enunciated a pet formula of their "crowd." Not sex, but the formula, is the modern Mephistopheles. It is borne in upon the intelligent young that they must have the courage of their emotions, in spite of everything — in spite, even, of not having the emotions. "But," she went on, "there's no point even in doing that — whatever you call it — unless you happen to want to, is there?"

"Not the least bit in the world. No point in doing anything unless you want to — if you're free. It's beastly hard on the people who don't want anything, though, isn't it? That's why I'm so sorry for you. You can't seem to get up a desire of respectable size. Nor will you live in the moment. You look before and after and pine for what is not. You're about two-litre capacity with one-litre contents. I don't see any way out of it. You won't use your beauty" — Julie pricked up an ear: he had never called it beauty before — "you won't use your talent. You're bored with almost everything, chiefly the weather. Well: I advise you to get rid of the weather in the only way known to man. And you won't even do that. You are a trial, Julie, and no man who wasn't crazy about you would stand it for a moment. Even I am almost fed up with it. Good-bye."

She took no notice of his farewell. "What in the world, my dear Paul, have you done with *your* life, if it comes to that? Have you a supreme desire? And if you have, have you set to work to achieve it? You've always been a drifter, so far as I know."

"Yes, but I haven't money — at least not enough to mock the stars with."

"It doesn't take money to work or to love — those wonderful things you were recommending to me."

"Oh, doesn't it? . . . But I do the other thing. I live in the day. And incidentally I have given some happiness. Don't worry about me, my dear."

One of his sentences brought a flush to Julie Fort's cheek. Yes, she liked him very much.

"We can at least go and get our *déjeûner*," she said, when the flush had

cooled. "It's high time, the way we've been quarrelling here. Wait a bit."

Julie disappeared into her bedroom. Paul Rennert listened to the rattle of silver things, the tinkle of crystal bottles, the swish of garments, while he waited. Presently, in an interval of silence, he crossed the studio to the curtained door. "I say, Julie," he called; "let me see the flamingoes. I never have, since we chose them in the shop."

"Oh" — her voice sounded preoccupied. "All right, wait a minute. The bed isn't made yet — and it needs sunlight for the flamingoes; but I'll rake up the fire . . ." The voice trailed off.

In a moment, Julie's hat appeared round the edge of the curtain. "Come along, then." She was ready for the street, and was pulling on her gloves.

Paul Rennert pushed aside the curtain and stepped into the bedroom. He

surveyed its small extent, noting every detail. Finally he threw back his head and laughed joyously. "I say, I had no idea how funny they'd be — those creatures. Don't you lie in bed and shriek every morning when you wake up?" He knelt down beside the bed, which Julie had hastily covered with a flame-colored quilt; laid his head on a pillow and stared around three walls at the frieze. The flamingoes *were* funny, marching round the small square room, above the white dado, in every conceivable attitude of self-consciousness. The designer had insulted each individual flamingo in a different way, taking from them all morality and leaving them only their unimpeachable color. There was not a single repeat. It was a gorgeous and sly procession. Paul Rennert, from his uncomfortable position, gazed, rapt.

"I've named them all." Julie laughed,

herself, from the door. "Come on, Paul, I'm hungry."

Rennert got up and followed her out of the room, stopping an instant to pat one flamingo. "Aline has doves," he remarked, in the studio. "Stupid as can be. But Aline is a fool."

"I thought she was a sensible woman — not like me." Julie's hand was on the door-latch, but she turned back to utter her retort.

"Oh, *that* — yes. But Aline's not up to you otherwise. Doves! You can almost hear them coo. . . . I say, it's raining black cats with white tails. I'll go call a taxi. You wait here. And by the way, Julie, when we've had some food, there's something important I want to tell you. Don't let me forget." He bolted out, to fetch the taxi.

"You like sweet white wine, I know you do," Paul Rennert complained, half

an hour later. "And I can't afford two kinds. But one can't drink water. You are a nuisance, Julie." He gave the order with a wry face.

"I'll pay for my own, and you can drink something else, thanks. We'll go Dutch, anyhow."

Rennert put his elbows on the table and clasped his hands. "Julie, I wouldn't marry you for the sake of possessing Aphrodite *en secondes noces*. You would drive me out of my mind. Why do you behave like two shop-girls at Childs'? I'll pay as long as I've got any money, and when I haven't, you may pay. But what you call 'Dutch' is the last limit. It takes all the fun out of it. It's like keeping household accounts in a greasy little book. What's the good of a meal when you're doing fractions all the time? I'd rather drink sea-water, if necessary!"

Apart from this sulky instant, they breakfasted gayly. But as Julie was lighting Paul's final cigarette for him, she asked soberly: "What was the important thing you had to say to me?"

"Oh, that! Well, Julie, you know your sense of color isn't up to your feeling for line, don't you? I've often told you that, haven't I? You won't be insulted?" He seemed anxious.

"Yes, but — There's no color to speak of in this homespun, surely."

"Bother the homespun. It's the *peignoir* over the chair — *chez vous*, you know. That pink, with the flamingoes. *Green*, Julie, you should have had green. I don't care how many pink ones you have in general, but it makes me quite sick to think of your wearing pink among the flamingoes. White would be best, but I suppose that isn't practical." He sighed. "You're no good at anything,

ultimately and finally, are you, dear — with all your money? But do get a green one to please me." His eyes roamed and grew absent; he bowed conventionally to some one at the far end of the room.

Julie did not answer. They got up and left the restaurant.

"Where are you going? Do you want a cab?"

"Yes, please." Julie's voice was crisp. "I'm doing some errands. You might come at tea-time. I know you hate it, but I'll give you coffee. You've no engagements, of course."

"Of course not. To-day was Meudon."

"Be sure to come. And don't turn up with a crowd. I want to talk to you. If you see Aline, you might tell her how nice the flamingoes are. She thinks I don't know anything about decoration."

"Shall I make a point of it?"

"Don't make a point of anything — ever. For God's sake!"

And Julie stepped into the cab, having for once succeeded in being cryptic for Paul Rennert.

V

THE rain had turned to a tepid drizzle when Rennert, later in the same day, arrived at Julie's studio. Mist lay on his overcoat like a fine mould. He entered, after his three knocks, without waiting for Julie to answer. Once inside the studio, he heard her moving about in the next room, and whistled a bar of "Là ci darem' la mano."

"Oh, Paul? All right. I'll be out soon." Her voice was preoccupied.

"Why didn't you build a fire?"

"Too busy" — and then silence.

"I'll build it, then. But you invited me, if you remember."

No answer came, this time, and Rennert, disposing of hat and coat, set to work on the fire.

"Shall I boil the kettle?" he asked finally.

Julie's head was thrust out from behind the curtain. "Oh, you said you wanted some coffee, didn't you? Well, then, make it. I'll be out for some tea, presently. Why did you make such a big fire? I'm going out this evening."

Paul Rennert whistled — not Mozart, this time. "Well, of all the nerve! You asked me to come. You rather made a point of it. And I'm going out, too, this evening. Make a note of that, young lady."

"Where?" The question cracked out like a shot.

Paul looked at Julie's blond head — all of her that had yet appeared. "Where? Oh, I don't mind telling you. Aline's Russian. 'Hans Breitmann gif a barty.' Is that your engagement, too?"

"They didn't ask me. I wonder why." Julie was invisible again in her bedroom.

Rennert busied himself about the coffee things. "Well, if you ask me, I think I know. But I'm not sure I shall tell you."

"All right. You can tell me presently."

And silence fell. Obscure noises from within showed that Julie was really busy, though they were not more explicit than that. Rennert, in the studio, wrinkled his brows and stared hard at the little kettle on the hob. He was busy, too, in utter dumbness, wondering whether or not it would be good tactics to tell Julie what he knew. If she would only always be stupid or always clever! But she had bewildering alternations. Not that he cared, except for tactical reasons. For a year he had

meant to have her to himself, some time. He could have had her long since, if she had been either clever or stupid. The deuce of it was that she was always tacking. And of late he had probably been dancing a too constant attendance. He would cut and run if she held out too long. It was no part of his philosophy — and he had one, a masterpiece of fluency — to want anything in vain. He managed his wants, on the whole, cleverly. Rennert groaned slightly to himself. The fact was that he wanted her hard: that she had stirred his passion; that there was something in Julie Fort no other woman seemed, at the moment, to have. He couldn't substitute, he could only go. And of course he did not want to go.

Julie came out into the studio at that moment. She had heard the groan, and asked him at once what the matter was.

"The kettle won't boil. And I had expected to find coffee waiting. What have you been doing with yourself? I haven't seen that rig since the days in New York when you lived with Tootie Beauregard and used to work."

The "rig" was a glorified pinafore of peacock blue — very faded, very spotted, and singularly becoming to the girl's blond irregularity of type. Its long, simple sweep of line and color seemed to smooth out her overtraced and overfretted features. Julie was always better without complications of millinery.

"I've been doing things," she answered vaguely.

"Umph! The coffee's ready, now. If you want tea, I'll boil the kettle again."

"Yes, please." She pursed her lips and seemed preoccupied; then took a cigarette and crossed her knees neg-

ligently, breathing out her preoccupation with the cigarette smoke.

"Why wasn't I asked to the party?"

"Petriloff thinks you're a bad example to Aline." Somewhere in the interval he had decided to tell her.

"I? To Aline? The little rotter! Do explain to me, Paul. And I think you might have stayed away yourself, in that case — if Petriloff is giving out his disgusting opinions."

"I was going to consult you — at least I think I was." The aroma of the coffee spread itself domestically between them, and both unconsciously relaxed into more comfortable attitudes. "Anyhow, of course I won't go if you'd rather not. I had half an idea it might amuse you to hear about it afterwards. They've got a little rip of a Hungarian gypsy — sweepings, my dear: a little devil off the dust-heap — coming in to dance

afterwards. And with that kind of crowd, she's sure to be one of them before they break up. I think you're well out of it. She shouldn't drink champagne out of *my* glass. Petriloff's blowing himself, you see. Aline wanted you, by the way, and so did some of the rest of the bunch. Wanted you to draw the gypsy: damn her with your precious paw. But the Slav wouldn't stand for it. Miss Chadwick will have to do her conscientious best."

"Do you mean to say that Miss Chadwick is going?"

"She's a serious woman, my dear. You're not."

"But if Miss Chadwick can stand the gypsy creature ——"

"You *are* dull, Julie." Rennert sighed. "Don't you see? Miss Chadwick is nothing but a pair of bi-focals and a gift for taking life visually. She not only

doesn't believe in the fourth dimension; she doesn't even believe in the third. Thickness is merely something she can suggest with a brush. People haven't really *got* it, you know. . . . But nobody could say you were impersonal, Julie, could they, now?"

Rennert had his voice well under control; but it seemed to him that stark hunger must be audible in his modulations.

"What is the matter with me?" reiterated Julie. She seemed to have forgotten her original preoccupation; she was really interested in the prohibition of Aline's lover.

"You're a Puritanic idler."

"But Miss Chadwick ——"

"Keeps more of the Ten Commandments than you do, but she works."

"Is he afraid I'll induce Aline to be frivolous?"

"Can't you take both ends of it? The point is that you neither work nor play. So you don't get admitted at either gate. This crowd doesn't approve. They might let a slacker like you in, for her charm; but when you proceed to be shocked, it's too much."

"Have I ever proceeded to be shocked?"

"Not verbally, oh, no. But you persist in taking a different line. It's the old rhyme:

> What are you good for, anyway?
> Not fit to eat, and wouldn't play.

And as your wealth is dazzling, you just might produce an effect. Miss Chadwick, of course, couldn't produce any. Don't bother your head about it. You're worth the whole boiling — though of course you can't keep it up forever. Have some more tea?"

"Thanks." Julie drank the entire cup before either spoke again.

"What was the thing you wanted to talk to me about?" Rennert asked, when she had set her cup down. "Forget about the party. I don't think I shall go, myself. Too darned dull."

"Something very important, wasn't it?" She behaved for a moment as if she had forgotten. But she got up and walked to the window, then walked back; showing by her nervousness that she had by no means forgotten. He did not answer her; he leaned back in his armchair, his eyes kindling faintly in the twilight.

Julie came finally and stood before him, her hands on her hips. "I can't stand the weather. So I am taking your advice. I'm leaving to-night."

"Oh!" Every muscle in Rennert's body urged him to move, to rise; but

he sat perfectly still, defying his muscles.

"Eight o'clock from the Gare de Lyon. Riviera express. Are you coming to see me off?"

Paul Rennert did not rise, though the effort not to brought little drops of sweat to his forehead, beneath his smooth dark hair.

"Oh, I think not," he said lightly. "There'll be a hundred porters for that train. If you're really leaving me, I'd better go to the party, hadn't I?"

"If you prefer it."

"Prefer it — I say, Julie, you're *not* human. You go off — and quite right — to sit in an orange grove and look at the Mediterranean, and you want to accent your good luck by watching me, shivering and forsaken, in that beastly station, while your gorgeous train pulls out. Haven't you a drop of human kind-

"I can't stand the weather. So I am taking your advice. I'm leaving to-night."

ness? If you had, you'd want me to be quite drunk by 7 P. M. I don't blame you for going, but I don't see why you should have such a mediæval taste for rubbing it in. I don't know whether I shall go to the party or not. But I do know that with you tucked up in the *train de luxe* I shall do what I damn please — and you ought to be willing."

Julie did not retort. She simply stared at him questioningly, gravely, a little sadly.

"You wouldn't think of joining me?" she asked at last.

"You jolly well know" — his voice had escaped control: it had a frankly nervous edge — "I'd go like a shot if I had the money. If it were the first of the month, I'd go anyhow, and starve until quarter-day. But it's late in the quarter — and meanwhile I've been

existing. You ask questions like a débutante's."

"I have money."

"That has nothing to do with it. I'm not your Pomeranian."

Julie ignored this. "I even have two tickets."

Paul Rennert got up at last, with one clean spring. "What are you talking about, Julie?" His voice was still low.

"Well, we couldn't go to Meudon, could we? And if I couldn't stand the weather, how could you?"

Rennert's eyes glittered above her, but he did not touch her. "You know a long sight more about human beings than you let on, Julie. How can I go off with you on your money?"

She turned a little of his own careful scorn upon him. "If I had known you were back there, Paul, I wouldn't have

mentioned it. And, as a matter of fact, it's the only way I'd let you go."

"Every one knows I've no money now for a lark. You'd be compromised."

"One's always compromised, in such a case. What has the money to do with it?"

"Oh, I might go — for a lark — if I had the cash. People might be brought to see that. But if you take me, there's only one interpretation."

"Interpretations don't matter — only facts." Her voice was very listless, as she gazed into the fire.

"But apparently you still refuse to face them." His voice vibrated significantly in her ear. But he did not touch her, though his hands were clenched.

"How you talk; how you talk, Paul! When I go the limit, I go it. See? I don't have to name a fact a hundred times

in order to face it." Her voice, no longer listless, rose in feverish excitement.

He clasped her then; concentrated in his passion as he had been in his self-control. Finally she shook herself free of his embrace.

"You'll have to go and pack. And I must finish. Come back here. We'll get some dinner in the station." And trembling a little, visibly, she disappeared into her bedroom.

Paul Rennert walked the floor of the studio, with stealthy, catlike steps, for full five minutes. Then he shouted at Julie's door. "Julie, come out, for God's sake! I've got something to say to you."

"If you talk any more, I shall change my mind. I can't stand it, I tell you. I don't want to discuss this thing. If you weren't a fool, you'd see it." But she appeared, flushed and nervous, in the doorway. He faced her across the big room.

"Take my advice, kiddy. Stay here and finish the rue de la Paix series. Then we'll talk. . . . I can get back some money on those tickets for you."

But Julie Fort, since Paul Rennert had kissed her, was a changed being. The formula, once arid philosophy, had become a glowing gospel. She could hardly wait to reach her orange grove above the blue sea.

"You'll be late. And if you are, I swear I'll go alone!" Her voice was jubilant.

Paul Rennert clattered in haste down the long stairs into the street. "If worse came to worst," he muttered, "I suppose I could marry her. But that *would* be the end of all things. Oh, well, here goes —" He shook off the clammy thought, and plunged, flushed and content again, out into the lamplit street.

VI

MR. REID sat in his elaborate office, at two removes from the outer world. His confidential clerk, Mr. Boomer, was made to inhabit the next room but one. The room between was pure waste space; an interval of emptiness that gave Mr. Reid the sense of privacy so necessary to him. Beyond the clerk's little room, the business of the firm was allowed to go on according to the traditions of his partners. Mr. Reid stipulated only for the empty room between himself and the nearest possibility of noise. It held a table and a few chairs; sometimes, by Mr. Reid's permission, people sat there waiting. But nothing necessary to the transaction of business was allowed to accu-

mulate therein: not even files or law-books.

Thence resulted confidence — and confidences. It is impossible to say how much, in the course of years, the empty room had contributed to Mr. Reid's knowledge of his clients' affairs. Space and time are so intimately connected that to possess one can easily seem like possessing the other. Mr. Reid's clients not only had elbow-room: they felt, by the same token, unhurried. Mr. Reid himself, with a little more space than he needed, always seemed also to have a little surplus time. The result was often to enable him to grasp shades and distinctions in a human situation, which bore not insignificantly on a possible compromise. The firm, to be sure, kept free, on principle, of lurid business; but money has always a potentially lurid aspect, and even Mr. Reid's firm

had been known to deal — by way of a will — in melodrama; since settling an estate can be as vulgar as holding an inquest.

Mr. Reid's spacious leisure — such, as I have said, was the effect, though he was a very busy man, with only a narrow chamber between him and a most professional bustle — was divinely fitted to accommodate itself to Cordelia Wheaton's affairs. Miss Wheaton herself could not have borne noise or hurry; and after Miss Wheaton's own retirement from wealth and America, a good many odd consultations were held in Mr. Reid's office that might not have been held at all on other legal premises. By a year or so after the meeting in Miss Wheaton's house, Stephen Reid could see her benevolence and its results in almost dramatic form. Cordelia Wheaton, in suppressing herself, had let loose a

very varied lot of activities upon the world. Walter Leaven, Bessie John, old Mrs. Williston, Julie Fort, even, knew something of the plot; but no one began to see it as a whole except the quiet and distinguished lawyer. Each beneficiary had necessarily abated some of his or her secrecy for this one man. He knew about the Johns' investments; he knew the size of the cheque that had started Jim Huntingdon on the longest trail of all; he wasted a good deal of time over Mrs. Williston's demands for a thumping interest on a safe investment; he strongly suspected that old Miss Bean had somewhere a veritable stocking stuffed with veritable bank-notes; and he was almost sure that Julie Fort's capital would not last out two years. He had also information enough for shrewd guesses about a dozen others. Certain families had gone west on the

strength of Miss Wheaton's gifts; one or two people had frankly disappeared; several automobiles had been acquired, as well as at least one pronounced taste for strong drink. One aged woman had been removed from an old ladies' home to be domineered over by almost forgotten relatives. It was natural that many effects should escape Mr. Reid. But there were threads enough to fill his fingers, and he sometimes felt that Cordelia Wheaton's beneficiaries would constitute a microcosm quite adequate to all experimental purposes.

Some acquaintance, almost amounting to tacit friendship, with Walter Leaven, was the only thing Reid had got out of it for himself. It had become sheer duty to look after Leaven's windfall for him, and Leaven's personality had won on the lawyer. Leaven, too, had excited Mr. Reid's curiosity. He was so eager

to have the money safe, and he seemed so little to want anything new or wonderful or sky-defying from it. There was a touch of the miser there, without a hint of greed. Yet at Walter Leaven's age he might so safely have thrown in the clutch! Mr. Reid shrewdly suspected that his arteries would not last much longer. But Leaven rejected the suggestion of an annuity with almost pious horror. Nor was he in haste to make a will. He had no one, he averred, to leave his money to. Yet the question of a will came up occasionally between them; and it was evident that something irked Leaven. Mr. Reid gave him time. He liked the multitudinous delicacies of the older man, shining here and there amid his reticence like flowers in a forest. Moreover, Walter Leaven was the only one of them all who asked, a little wistfully, for news of Miss Wheaton. He

was formal; he was quiet; and there was no eagerness in his eyes. The rest of them — even Mrs. John — had seemed to clutch a little. Reid liked him.

On this particular day, the lawyer was expecting Leaven. A note — in spite of his telephone, Leaven still kept the more dignified habit of notes — had warned him. Mr. Reid was very busy; but he had had, for some weeks, a revived interest in Miss Wheaton's affairs. He was glad Leaven was coming, and he gave orders that they should not be disturbed.

Walter Leaven was always shy to begin with. He hesitated as though the spacious leisure of that office were not a fiction. But at last he made a vague approach.

"About my will. I've been thinking. I should like to get it off my mind."

"I think you have never told me whether you had ever made one."

"No. Not really. A little paper, stating that one or two objects were to go to the Metropolitan. No one would have contested it. But now that I am a man of some property" — he smiled sadly — "I fancy it is a duty."

"We will draw it up for you with pleasure. You might send me full notes of what you want to do, and then I will have it properly executed. Little papers, you know, are apt to be no good at all. Third cousins spring up — third cousins who care nothing at all about the Metropolitan." He explained whimsically, as he would have done to a child.

"Quite so. Yes." Leaven's wintry smile was pure manners; he was evidently pondering a larger matter.

"I ought to have done it before," he said, a little anxiously — as people will

be anxious for the final accomplishment of something they have postponed for months. "But I was uncertain in my mind. I had thought of leaving my share to young Huntingdon. But I had a long letter from him this morning — a very jolly letter — and I am not sure that I can bring myself to it. I respect him, but I do not understand his tastes. And it seems to me," he finished irritably, "that perhaps enough of Miss Wheaton's money has been spent already on the continent of Asia."

Mr. Reid shifted his gaze a little and listened intently to his companion's tone. A less experienced man would have examined Leaven's countenance. "I am almost inclined to agree with you," he said quietly. "But I should be much interested to know your reasons. Is young Huntingdon making an ass of himself?"

"Not at all, not at all." Leaven's

voice was almost apologetic. "But his letter rather put me off, jolly as it was. I dare say I am narrow. My life has been chiefly Italy — and then memories of Italy — and then more memories. I can't, at my age, take an interest in Sikkim, can I? Nor yet in the people he seems to have fallen in love with. Lepchas, I think he calls them. Certainly not Tuscans. I think he wants to enrich a whole village of them. Set them up agriculturally. Buy land outright for them. It seems they've been oppressed. *I* don't know. The virtues of the present generation are as incomprehensible to me, I'm afraid, as their vices. No, not Jim Huntingdon; though I respect him."

"Well, send me the notes, and I will have the will drawn up," repeated Mr. Reid. If this was all — much as he tended to like Leaven, he remembered that there

was business beyond the empty room that he ought to attend to. Then Leaven pulled him up short.

"I want to consult you first. My object is to leave everything I have to Cordelia Wheaton. But if I leave it to her outright — well, you see what she has done with it already. It would be battledore and shuttlecock. If I don't consider young Huntingdon good enough for her money, certainly I don't consider any of the others so — though the Johns seem to me nice people in a smug way. . . . So," he resumed after a pause, "I can't will it straight to her. I couldn't depend on her using it herself. That is where you must help me out. Couldn't I leave it to you, in trust for her — so that she couldn't possibly spend the principal, yet couldn't get away from the income?"

Mr. Reid placed his finger-tips to-

gether. "Would you mind telling me how recently this occurred to you? I take it, from what you said about young Huntingdon, that it has not always been your idea."

Leaven hesitated. His grayish-brown face wrinkled with the obvious endeavor to choose his words.

"No, I did not think of it at first. Perhaps I was a little bitter. Perhaps I was a little proud." He did not explain his words, and Mr. Reid was forced to get from them such light as he could. "And of course it seemed rather absurd just to give it back, when she had been at such pains to get rid of it. But all that has passed away. I particularly want her to have it — in spite of herself."

Mr. Reid was a tactful man, but he felt curiosity sharp as youth's own, and he could not refrain.

"I hope you will not think me impertinent. . . . Has anything happened to bring about this decision on your part?"

"Nothing — nothing." The expression in Walter Leaven's face sufficiently disposed of any suggestion of the sort. A shadowy countenance, escorted by shadows, you might say. "I have known Cordelia Wheaton a very long time. Thoughts may be permitted me that might seem officious in others. I shall be most at peace if I know that what she has given me is placed where it can be useful to her — where she cannot prevent its being useful to her. So, if you would kindly draw up that kind of document, I will send you the notes you ask for. Now I will not take any more of your time."

At the door of the empty room he turned. "Is it asking a great deal of

you to ask you this? I — I really know nothing about such things. It is sometimes done, surely? Whatever the usual procedure — I leave it quite to you."

"You can rely upon us." The lawyer spoke in a short, satisfied tone.

"Thank you." He still held the knob of the door. "How is she? Are you still by way of hearing?"

This time it was Mr. Reid who replied absently. "Well, I think. Yes, well." His mind was busy elsewhere, and Walter Leaven passed into the outer offices.

Left alone, Mr. Reid did not at once declare himself ready for the business of the firm. He was profoundly moved. A very old friend of Miss Wheaton's, Leaven evidently was. The lawyer did not speculate sentimentally. Love-affairs did not concern him unless they bore a legal aspect. Besides, Leaven's face was

the negation of emotion, even of that adulterated emotion known as sentiment. But it was very pleasing that Leaven should have come to him on just that errand. He liked Leaven; he felt as if Leaven had done him a good turn. Stephen Reid would not forget. Here and there a human being did have some sensitiveness, some delicacy. . . . The fact is that Mr. Reid still austerely thought of that distributed wealth as Miss Wheaton's money. Even after a year he could hardly recognize the scattered particles as separate units. He had never liked her decision to impoverish herself; and the little he knew about her own plans for existence shocked him quite as much as fuller knowledge had shocked Leaven. Leaven had finally come to see Cordelia's act as vitally a part of her, a madness for which no one but Cordelia was respon-

sible. His bitterness was against life for permitting Cordelia, of all people, to be like that. But Mr. Reid was slightly hostile to the rabble that had benefited: he saw them, at least, as accessories after the fact. With the exception of Leaven, who had the grace not to be happy, he felt them all slightly criminal.

Luckily there was other business to bestir himself about. He rang, with a sigh, for Boomer.

VII

BESSIE JOHN was a little thin. She had never been plump, but there had been just flesh enough to fill the hollows; now there were visible concavities in cheek and neck. She was a brave woman, however, and, though two years had passed since the November afternoon forty people had spent uncomfortably together in Miss Wheaton's drawing-rooms, though the first glow of apparent wealth had faded and life was constantly making unexpectedly dull demands upon her, she had spirit and humor left to face the world with. The "sea-captain's front parlor" was a little frayed and dimmed by time and accidents; the house had shrunk appallingly since the twins had come. A very neces-

sary white-uniformed person perpetually snatched from the Johns the price of opera-tickets. Bills were rendered as inconveniently, it seemed, as they had been in the earlier days. But Bessie John had not coquetted with her "Colonial" ideal: she had really accepted it for better, for worse. If she had developed a tendency to tea-gowns, they were only her substitute for caps. Her movements were as brisk as ever, and her tea-gowns were made of serviceable stuff.

There is no doubt that Bessie John, in accepting her ideal, had deliberately narrowed her vision. She bade fair to be, some day, over-domestic, over-maternal, over-conventional; to let herself go in consecrated selfishness. In other words, she was shaping to the type of Wife and Mother. For her husband and her children she was prepared to be a

brute to the rest of the world, if the rest of the world got in their way. In the earlier years of her marriage Philip John had held her, as it were, on a leash. She had liked her leash, but there had been strains and tugs, gambollings that amused John. Now she was tethered more firmly, and when Philip went forth into the world she did not accompany him. She was going to be more Colonial than she had ever dreamed of being; her hyperboles had turned and clutched her. A nice woman, Bessie John, but not in the least what she had seemed to be when childless, mocking, and poor. Sometimes she wondered fantastically if she would have developed differently under the influence of Chinese Chippendale. But she soon gave over even wondering, for the beginnings of change in her were real.

Take an instance. In the first days of

buying and furnishing she had spoken lightly to her husband of Julie Fort. Now that Julie was known to have taken the primrose path, Bessie John never mentioned her at all. She had for Julie's vagaries the sternness, not of religion — for religion comports charity — but of convention; which, being a law and nothing more, does not trouble itself with psychology. It is ticklish business to damn people, for damning is, after all, God's affair; but it is perfectly simple to cut them, and in her heart Bessie John cut Julie. If you ask me the real reason for her mentally cutting Julie (she had no chance to cut her face to face, for Julie was still abroad), I can only say that I believe it was because the twins were boys. Or another example, more vital still: Mrs. John had recently found it possible once more to call Mrs. Williston "Aunt

Blanche." She had come to feel the natural solidarity of people who have a little money as against those who have none. Two years after Miss Wheaton's beneficent gesture, Bessie John would not have given the great-nephew a dollar for cigarettes.

Superficially, of course, not much of all this was visible. Bessie John had not yet altered her vocabulary. It would take a good many years for her to achieve the type towards which she was straining. But her type was certainly meeting her half-way: consider the twins!

Philip John, content from boyhood to be as God made him, did not hold within himself the seeds of change. When he seemed different, you might be sure that he had only turned slowly about, unconsciously displaying another aspect. You might never have seen it before; it might surprise you; but that was

sheer miscalculation on your part, and could be laid to no fickleness of his. He was romantically devoted to his wife, though he did not wholly understand her. He was a little surprised at her passion for domesticating herself, but it fell in with traditions familiar to him, so that he merely considered himself more fortunate than ever. The new necessity of economy was more welcome to him than the first flush of extravagance had been; it was part of life as he had always expected to find it. Bessie continued to love him as much as if it had not been her duty to. What more could he ask?

From that you must make out as well as you can what life was eventually to do with the Johns.

It was again November. Bessie John waited in the dimmed drawing-room for

her husband to come home. Even the twins' *coucher* was not allowed to interfere with the quiet half-hour between his return and the necessity of dressing. What was the white-uniformed person for? Bessie was possessed of the very moral intention of getting full service for the wages she paid. Let one of the twins depart in any way from the laws of nature as laid down by specialists, and she was on the spot, flushed and alert. Otherwise — Philip was her husband.

He came in later than she had expected him, with a worried look that did not escape her. She bundled him into the big wing-chair (it needed recovering) and as usual took the words out of his mouth — out of his throat, rather, since they never reached his lips.

"How tired you are, precious! Was

it very rotten? If Mr. Reid looks like a trip to South America, you must get out a warrant. I hope you reminded him that the investments were all made by his explicit advice. Is there anything the matter with our money, dear?"

"Not a thing, so far as I know."

"Well, then, nothing matters, does it? But he's a beast to make wrinkles in your forehead. He might have considered me. You have all the looks of the family, and if he mars your beauty I will sue him. The next time, *I* will reply to Mr. Reid's summons. The money is mine, anyhow. I never gave you a penny of it for your own, did I, dear?"

"No, you didn't." He underscored the words.

"Well, of course—" She flung out her hands in a beautiful, free gesture. "I couldn't trust you with it, could I, now, Philip? We had it all out. You

don't mean to say that you wanted me to?"

"I didn't say that, Bess."

"Why, Phil, Phil, is there anything *in* this? I told you I couldn't trust you to spend it on yourself — to fend off beggars in high places. I kept it, heaven knows, so that it would *be* kept. You've always had a power of attorney. And what business is it of Mr. Reid's, anyhow? Can't you and I decide a thing like that?"

"You're way off, my dear." He laughed a little. "Why should Reid lecture you through me? Do you think he would do such a thing, or I listen to him?"

"Well, what is it, then?" Bessie John stroked her dark-blue dress, smoothing the thin stuff out over her knees. She had relaxed since the reassuring words came.

"Reid wants to see us both to-morrow

afternoon. And we are not the only ones. He is sending for others, too. Leaven, I believe, and Mrs. Williston, and one or two more. Something is up, but he didn't tell me what. I think he got me there to tell me and then changed his mind. I reminded him that I was not directly concerned in Miss Wheaton's gifts. I made the appointment for us both to-morrow, according to his request."

Mrs. John had sprung to her feet while he spoke. "Philip!" she cried. "She wants to take it back! But she can't — she can't. Mr. Reid ought to know that. I hope you didn't give him any encouragement. Why, I'd take it to every court in the country. It was a free gift. Nothing could have been more legal. Do you think the papers were wrong — inadequate? Lawyers are capable of anything."

"Calm down, Bess. I should say the transfers were about as legal and final as transfers could be. And I don't believe you realize that Mr. Reid's firm is one of the most respected in the city. They wouldn't lend themselves to a trick if they could. You do get the strangest ideas!"

"I get them because I am afraid. You said yourself that something was up. If the investments are all right and the title is impeccable, I don't see what it can be. But there's trouble ahead, somehow. I can feel it all over."

"Oh, when you take to feeling things all over —" he scoffed wearily.

"A woman's brain, I really believe, isn't restricted to her head-piece. The tips of my fingers tell me things." She clawed the air delicately with them by way of emphasis.

Philip John leaned over, caught the

clawing fingers on an ascending spiral, and kissed them.

"I don't know what it is, dear. But we're bound to go and see. It can't be anything very bad. Even if worse came to worst ——"

"If worse came to worst, it would be Chaos and Old Night. Do you realize that I have planned out our whole existence, for three score years and ten, on the basis of what we have? With margins for accident and everything? I've counted to a dollar the twins' schooling and their advantages. Adenoids and all. I've counted in your prospective rises in salary: every one, exactly as it may be expected to occur. Why, my dear, I have a budget all made out until the twins are twenty-five — and for us, after that. We're thrown on the wide world if anything happens to my money. I've built up a philosophy of life on it. You

take away my law and my prophets, you take away my soul, if you take it away."

"Souls oughtn't to be dependent on hard cash, ought they?"

"Why don't you take orders, Philip?" she mocked. "I've turned myself into a certain kind of person. I've borne you children. I've made a covenant with Society. I have done irrevocable things. . . . And if you talk of losing the little money we have, I shall scream. Am I a serpent that I should cast my skin? I have not been extravagant. I couldn't be. The change was too solemn for that. I've taken vows, if you like. Mr. Reid shan't have a penny. To trick me into having children!"

"Bess!" His reproach was only in part for her incoherence.

"Well, that would be it. I should never have consented to have them if

I hadn't expected to bring them up decently — to make their bodies fit and their minds noble. Cordelia Wheaton brought those children into the world. She'll not go back on her responsibilities while I am there to fight for them." Then she dropped back, exhausted. Her tone changed.

"Forgive me, Philip. I may have said things to pain you. Only I hate being the mouse when some one else is the cat. I think you can trust me. I shan't make a scene, whatever happens."

"Nothing can happen, dear, so far as I can see. And, you know, when you happen to feel like a mouse, you think everything *is* a cat."

She leaned over him and patted his shoulder. "I know you don't misunderstand me: we've always been so straight with each other at every stage. I couldn't

live without the twinnies, even if I had to take them round with a hurdy-gurdy and make all our livings in coppers. I honestly couldn't. I could have got on very well without maternal affection, but once there you can't get rid of it. It's indestructible as asbestos. I know you understand; so you'll forgive me, won't you?"

"Of course." She was sitting on the arm of his chair, and he drew her head to his shoulder.

"I wonder who the others will be," she mused, smiling a little. "Old Mr. Leaven goes without saying. How Aunt Blanche hates him! He's godless, you know. It will be fun to see them together. Thank heaven, for every one's sake, Julie Fort's abroad. She has spent all hers, they say. And old Miss Bean — what a pity she can't be there! I met her once in Mr. Reid's office, and

she looked at his chair as if it were the Great White Throne. You know the way she pulls her poor old skirts up and cringes away a little from anything she respects. But she's safe in the hospital."

"In the hospital? What's the matter?"

"Ssh — ssh! Aunt Blanche told me in confidence. She went back to the Holy Rollers after a season of New Thought. She couldn't think newly enough. And last week she broke her leg rolling under a porch in Hackensack. Saints always did have hard luck with their anatomies, you know." Bessie John laughed softly as she ruffled her husband's hair. Then she rose quickly.

"I must go and say good-night to the twins, Philip. Won't it be funny when they can say good-night? Let's dress extremely for dinner. Put on all

your pearls, dear. And we'll open something and drink to Cordelia Wheaton. That's what teetotallers were meant for — to have their healths drunk." She left the room, still laughing softly.

The Johns dined festally. Not only did Bessie "open" burgundy, but she produced as well her own particular vintage: not her mere railing of every day, but wit with a bouquet, of which she still had a little left. It bubbled up between them, evoking youth, when there had seemed to be an inexhaustible store of it. Smart and shimmering in her best frock, she faced Philip John with "all his pearls" on. She even won her sober-seeming husband to irresponsibility with her. They laughed until they choked; they invaded the sea-captain's front parlor with a nursery atmosphere — where every one plays as hard as he can and it is some one's else business

to pick things up afterwards. It was late when they went up-stairs to bed.

Philip John, positively worn out with fun, slept almost immediately. His wife lay on her side, watching his vague form in the bed next hers. The glimmer of a street light struck through a crack in the shutter and enabled her to half-see, half-surmise the sleeping shape of him. She was not nervous; she was thinking. Her bodily comfort was complete. It was not pleasant to stay awake with thoughts like hers; but how much better than to sleep and wake unprepared! She really needed the time and the peace. For Bessie John, in the midst of her gayety, had suddenly understood. It had come to her like a flash as she crossed the hall to fetch something they needed for an absurd joke. Towards dawn, she seemed to herself to have canvassed every inch of the situation. The

tactician in her dismissed his staff. Without an effort or a sigh she turned on her other side and slept.

VIII

MR. REID had not summoned many people to his little conference. Indeed, there were not many left in New York whom he could summon, for much of Miss Wheaton's money had betaken itself to inaccessible places. There was Randall, for example — a stiff, silent man, whose wife had died six months before, her last illness made just tolerable to her husband by the luxuries Miss Wheaton had enabled him to lavish on her. But Randall had gone west to make a new start there for his boys. Jim Huntingdon was sitting somewhere on the roof of the world, dangling his feet over in an ecstasy. Mrs. Corbet was solitary, and could have been drawn into the conference; but since her ac-

cession of fortune her health had left her, and she was wintering in California. Mrs. Corbet, had Mr. Reid but known, need scarcely have been regretted; for, from the moment that she could afford operations, one after another had been found necessary. She was now living as cheaply as medical advice permitted and looking forward to another in the spring — one of those women whose doom it is to be nothing but a complicated surgical demonstration. Many of the beneficiaries Mr. Reid had, of course, quite lost track of; some of the others there was no use in consulting; one or two had died. There were a few left — wise virgins of the parable, but by no means twelve of them. These he had asked to come. It was a painful business: he dreaded it.

The Johns came first through the empty room, Bessie John wearing her

quietest clothes and her quietest manner, Philip a little ponderous and tired. Mrs. John had not spoken to her husband of Mr. Reid and his summons since she had asked for his forgiveness the afternoon before. Walter Leaven followed close upon them, a little older, a little dryer and fainter, than the last time he had visited those offices. Mrs. Williston was last of all, so very late that it was apparently by intention. The lawyer looked about at the tiny group. Strange that after only two years these should be all he could, for one reason or another, lay hands on for his purpose! But he looked at Walter Leaven and at Philip John and took heart.

In a few words, nervous but clear, he put the situation before them. Miss Wheaton had reserved very little of her capital for her own use. It had been left in his hands, yes; but she had in-

sisted, contrary to all his advice, in keeping the amount in its original investment. It was a matter, he believed, of sentiment — an inheritance from her mother that had always been invested in that particular concern. Perhaps they knew that she had not always been in sympathy with her father's methods? He had grown anxious, warned her, but she had refused to alter it. He could not be sure that his last letter had even reached her; he had had no answer. . . . Times had changed very much: new legislation, new mergers, new methods had killed the business. The stockholders had lost all their money. Miss Wheaton, voluntarily impoverished, was now involuntarily penniless. What could be done about it?

The only expression of shocked surprise came from Philip John. Walter Leaven had so long been beset by vague

In a few words, nervous but clear, he put the situation before them.

presentiments that he was mightily relieved to know the worst: his features relaxed. Old Mrs. Williston had her religion to sustain her — a religion that dealt largely in the catastrophes of other people.

Bessie John had guessed it at five minutes past eleven the evening before, and had had time to deal with it. But Bessie John did not wish to be the first to break the silence that fell. She was very, very glad that the money was hers and not Philip's, for that meant that Philip could not break the silence either. He could not even consult her privately, there in public. She sat, taut and prepared. Her plan had been all a matter of taking certain cues that she felt sure would come. She waited for them. She was counting on Aunt Blanche.

Mr. Reid, who had been counting on

Walter Leaven, saw that though he could probably still count on him, it would not be for speech. One quick glance showed him Philip John distressed and silent, prey of feelings as delicate as you liked but conflicting. He was obviously moved, but he could not rush to Miss Wheaton's relief with his wife's money. Mrs. John was entirely at ease in her inn: impulses perfectly in order. Finally, Mr. Reid turned to Mrs. Williston — with deference. He must get speech out of the group somehow. He lifted his eyebrows with irresistible interrogation, as if assuming that all of them must needs give precedence to her massive virtue.

No questions lightened the silence, and Mrs. Williston took her time. Finally she turned to the lawyer.

"Where are the others?"

"What others?"

"The others who should have been here with us."

Mr. Reid smiled austerely. "They are everywhere and nowhere. I have communicated with a few by writing, but you four are all I could gather together for a personal conference. Several whom I could have got hold of I preferred to leave alone for the present. I wanted to discuss the matter with — well, with the chosen few. It is for us to decide what shall be done."

"Why for us more than the others?" she asked relentlessly.

"I do not care to publish this too widely at present. Besides, a good many of Miss Wheaton's beneficiaries" — the word stood out naked among them — "are no longer in a position to be of practical use. The estate was very much broken up. I selected, of those who were at hand, the people who were, for one

reason or another, more able to take responsibility in the matter; who had more wisdom; who presumably hadn't squandered their windfall utterly; who — well, who could be depended on to take in the situation and to act. It is probably no news to any of you that some of Miss Wheaton's friends have turned out to be mere wasters and fools. . . . I should be glad, Mrs. Williston, if you would give us your advice. You are a very old friend of hers, I believe."

"I have known Cordelia Wheaton a long time," Mrs. Williston admitted, "but my own opinion is that she is out of her mind. I think we should proceed on that basis."

"Your reasons for believing that?"

Mrs. Williston was wholly undismayed by his sharpness. She replied, not without unction. "I have been told that she has spent the last two years in the East,

giving herself up entirely to the practices of some heathen sect. I merely put the most charitable construction upon her actions. I know of no fund that can provide for such people; I see no way out of it but an insane asylum."

"Do I understand you to mean that you think her dangerous to society?"

"Probably not. But I do not see how she can benefit by Christian charity. I am on the executive board of the Refuge for Aged and Indigent Gentlewomen, but I should be powerless. All our inmates are required to profess the Christian religion. I will make inquiries; any point that can be stretched shall be. But you see my position. We are nonsectarian, but evangelical. I am afraid there is no hope there. . . . Of course, if Cordelia should see the light again. . . . But she was always obstinate. I was very fond of her, and this is a great

distress to me." Mrs. Williston shook out the folds of a fine white handkerchief, and ceased speaking.

Walter Leaven, with complete disregard of manners, got up and walked to where Mr. Reid sat behind his desk. There he whispered flagrantly in the lawyer's ear. Mr. Reid shook his head. . . . Leaven whispered again. . . . The others turned away from this by-play, each choosing an object to stare at in the comfortable office. Bessie John fixed a brown leather cushion in a deep chair, as once she had fixed Miss Wheaton's chessmen, with her gaze. She seemed to be counting the buttons on the cushion, if indeed she were not too intent on it even to count. The chair was on her left hand, and her husband sat at her right. John contemplated his wife's right ear as if trying to mesmerize her through that novel means. . . . Mr. Reid at

last scribbled something on a paper, folded the paper carefully, and handed it to Leaven. Whereupon Leaven left the room. The click of the closing door brought all eyes back to Mr. Reid.

The lawyer turned to Bessie John.

"Mrs. Williston is too overcome by her friend's misfortune to envisage the situation helpfully, I fear. Mr. Leaven said that he should return presently, but meanwhile let me ask you for your opinion, Mrs. John."

Bessie John shook out her muff and regarded it, head on one side, as if even then she needed time to recover her coherence from the shock.

"I hardly go so far as Mrs. Williston in the matter of Miss Wheaton's sanity. Misled, misguided, rather, I should think." She paused. She was able to look at Mr. Reid without including her husband in her fringe of vision, and

she took full advantage of that fact. "Could you give us an idea, Mr. Reid, of how many people, besides ourselves, are in a position to join us in any plan we might make for Miss Wheaton?"

The lawyer answered calmly, with tight lips. "No, Mrs. John, I cannot. As I said, I have written to those I thought possible." He referred to a list. "Mr. Huntingdon is virtually inaccessible, as are several others. . . . Miss Fort, I believe, has nothing left: it is rather a tragic case. Miss Bean is in hospital, but I hope to see her soon. Mrs. Corbet is too ill to approach. Randall — Struther — um-m. The decision must be made right here, among us. We'll let the broken reeds go, for the moment, I think. What will you do?" The question rang out commandingly.

Mrs. John raised a deprecating hand. "Mr. Reid, I quite see the gravity of

the situation. Of course we must all face it. But it is not a question of duty, is it? It is a question of sentiment, and of how much we can severally afford to spend for sentiment's sake. Don't you think you are perhaps a little too prone to think of our money as still being Miss Wheaton's? And of her misfortune as being necessarily ours? I see the irony of it all — poor Miss Wheaton! I could wish she had never divided up her wealth. But you cannot go back on history. Some of us have taken on responsibilities, you see, that cannot be cast off because the poor lady has had hard luck. I am sure Mrs. Williston is thinking of that, too. I am quite ready to do my part — to make sacrifices to do it. But I cannot sacrifice my children; nor, I fancy, can Mrs. Williston sacrifice her family. My husband and I are not free. And I do not think" — she finished with an im-

pertinence so delicate that it was almost courteous — "that anything can be gained by putting a pistol to our heads. It is so very unfortunate, is it not, that the ones who are free — unmarried, childless, footloose — have all turned out to be useless, irresponsible? — in some cases, I'm afraid, worse."

Mr. Reid considered for a moment. Then he said quietly: "I ought to give you a chance to think it over and consult by yourselves. In point of fact, I did not realize that it would be such a complicated business. Shall we adjourn as soon as Mr. Leaven comes back?"

"By no means!" Bessie John was very quick with her reply. "I am sure none of us is so rich that he doesn't know to a penny what he can afford."

"Certainly not." Mrs. Williston had put away her handkerchief and was ready to take up the discussion again.

"We have all, as Bessie John says, taken responsibilities upon us that we cannot lightly shake off. I shall not rest until I have found some place for Cordelia Wheaton to lay her head. But I cannot take bread out of the mouth of the righteous." She was as firm as she was vague.

Philip John rose and walked to the window. There he turned and stood tense, his back against the wall. "The money is my wife's, not mine. I haven't any authority to speak. But I want to say, here and now, that if among us we don't manage to make Miss Wheaton comfortable for the rest of her days, I think we're a set of skunks." Then he faced about and stared out of the window.

Bessie John had not been prepared for exactly that. She had expected Philip at some point to declare himself, but

she had not quite counted on being called a skunk. Yet, though she was sorry to be called one, she did not shrink from her determination to be one — by her husband's definition.

"Of course, I must talk things over with my husband," she said. "But I think we can virtually decide everything now. Is Miss Wheaton planning to return to this country?"

"Miss Wheaton probably does not yet know of her catastrophe. But she will know, and, if I am not mistaken, we shall have to take all steps for her. If she is to die of poverty I, personally, should be very unwilling to have her die of it in India. I have assumed that she will return. We cannot look after her very well over there — and I do not see any particular willingness on the part of her protégés to continue her income so that she can go on with her

life precisely as before. Besides — she is not young, and her health is poor."

"Oh, yes, I think she must come back. Don't you, Philip?" Mrs. John's tone of solicitude was perfect.

John did not turn to answer her. His reply was uttered into the window-pane. "I should think so. But I'm not in on this discussion." He took a seat then in the farthest corner of the room and began a meticulous inspection of some law-books on the shelves near him.

"About how much income has Miss Wheaton just been deprived of?" Bessie John took a note-book out of her muff and smiled at Mr. Reid.

But Mrs. Williston interrupted. "I don't think that is the point. The point is how much she absolutely needs to live on, in America — in some quiet place, of course."

"You are quite right, Aunt Blanche.

I should have said that. Indeed, you are the most practical of us all. Let me amend my question, Mr. Reid."

"I do not feel that that is for me to say," the lawyer answered, with silken hostility.

"I hoped you would advise us," Bessie John protested sweetly. "If we are to organize a fund, we must decide that first of all. Then Mrs. Williston and I could write down how much we could afford to subscribe, and leave the list with you to be completed by appeals to others. I think, of course, that the appeal should be restricted to friends of Miss Wheaton's. And, by the way, aren't there several of her friends who are rich? They certainly ought to be spoken to."

Mr. Reid said nothing. But Mrs. Williston spoke for him.

"Quite right, Bessie. The rich should

give from their abundance. I will do what I can, but I warn every one that I shall not curtail my poor benevolence to worthy objects for the sake of giving luxuries to Cordelia Wheaton. Are we to take the children's bread and cast it unto the dogs?"

If Mrs. John winced a little under the Biblical question, she did not show it outwardly. "You are, of course, answerable to your own conscience, Aunt Blanche. I should be quite as willing, myself, to support Miss Wheaton as if she were evangelical. But then my feelings are always getting the better of my principles. What I think we must all realize" — she spoke as if the beneficiaries were all there, a cloud of witnesses — "is that this is a charity like another. If Miss Wheaton has rich friends left, they must be appealed to. And I think Mr. Reid is the person to do it."

The lawyer fixed her with a hard gaze. "So you think this is a charity like another, Mrs. John?"

Ah, for that, she *had* prepared herself! It was the crux of the whole matter.

"Yes, Mr. Reid," she answered gravely. "I understand why you do not see it in that way. You think of us as having received lavishly from that admirable woman, and as being niggardly, now, with her. In other words, you take all this not as charity on our part, but as a just debt. And I am going to tell you why I do not agree with you. I think, with you, that the persons to be appealed to first are the people to whom Miss Wheaton has been generous, financially. But I doubt, with all the wastage there has been, if we can suffice to it. We were poor — all of us — when Miss Wheaton divided her money. It was divided, as you know, among a great

many people. The unprincipled ones have squandered theirs already. A few of us looked to the future and ordered our lives somewhat differently on the strength of it. Mrs. Williston, here, has undoubtedly pledged herself to do things for her nephews and to support good works which are a part of her religion. My husband and I have two children now. We are not in the same case we were in when Miss Wheaton, quite gratuitously and unsolicited, changed our expectations. None of us could have foreseen this. If you foresaw it, I think you should have warned us all — that is, if you expected us to step in and correct the workings of fate. Life is not the same for any of us that it was two years ago. The next day, the next month, we could have relapsed; we could have given the money back. Now, most of us, probably, have quite new factors to

reckon with. I cannot starve my children because the money that feeds them came originally from Miss Wheaton, who professed, then, not to want it or need it. It was as much an outright gift as if she had willed it and died. All of us who were not mere butterflies have accepted responsibilities on that basis — very sacred responsibilities. There was no hint whatever that that was not the right thing for us to do. And I maintain, in my own case, that my children are my duty and that Miss Wheaton is a charity. As for luxuries — we have no luxuries to give up. I have no jewels, no motor-cars to sell, no unnecessary expenses to curtail. Whatever I contribute will come out of the life-blood of my family. I am willing and anxious to contribute something, but I utterly deny any one's right to ask it, or any one's reason in calling it a duty. I do

not know whether or not I speak for Mrs. Williston, but I fancy I do. I fancy I speak for every one who has not made ducks and drakes of Miss Wheaton's gift. As I say, I will give what I can; but it is so very little that I think you will have to go to richer people in the end. You have, I understand, no authority from Miss Wheaton, in any case. If I know anything about her, she would rather die where she is than have you demand her money back from the people she gave it to. Of course you are right to try to plan for her, but I think you can take it from me that Miss Wheaton would rather you appealed to those of her friends who never needed her money, than to those she knew desperately did need it. And no amount of consulting or discussion," she finished, "can change my firm conviction that I am acting rightly. My husband seems to have gone

on record as disagreeing with me; but I hope that, now I have explained myself, he will change his mind. In any case, I shall have plenty of time to explain myself further to him. . . . Do you think it necessary for us to wait longer for Mr. Leaven? The sum I can offer is almost negligible."

And she rose, fastening her furs about her neck.

In point of fact, Bessie John had expected more help from Mrs. Williston than Mrs. Williston had given her. She had expected figures — small ones — from Aunt Blanche: something named, that she could easily better. But, tactician though Bessie thought herself, she had worked in ignorance. Aunt Blanche, a few months before, had bought an annuity; and she had spent this hour like a doleful pendulum, alternating between the desire to let herself out by

confessing to the annuity, and the fear that, if she confessed, her family would learn of it and cast off her yoke. The bewildered woman had been trying, in all the intervals of speech, to calculate whether, if her niece and nephews did know, they would still continue to cling to her for the sake of scraps. They might; but then again the scraps might not seem to them worth clinging for. She was not psychologist enough to know. And she did not wish to give up the throne-room and the deference — for which she paid, in cold cash, very little. If Bessie John had known how acutely Mrs. Williston had been suffering, she might easily have forgiven her for not furnishing all the expected cues. As it was, she saw only that Aunt Blanche was not to be counted on as she had thought, and therefore she rose, having stated her own case in full.

Walter Leaven's re-entrance, however, made it impossible for her to leave at once, though she did not sit down again. Philip John and Mrs. Williston had also risen to their feet.

Mr. Reid seemed ready enough to have them depart.

"They have said their say, Leaven," he remarked curtly. "If you can stay on for a little, I will report to you."

But Mrs. Williston could not go out of the open door without one vain effort for the semblance of nobility.

"It has occurred to me just now," she began, "that Cordelia might make a joint household with Miss Bean. I am not sure that that would not be the best solution. Miss Bean is used to managing on very little. And Cordelia is very unpractical. I wonder it did not occur to us before. I dare say, if we all contributed" — she glanced austerely at Leaven

— "it could be arranged. Cordelia has been a vegetarian for years. Think it over. I am quite struck with it. Are not you, my dear?" She turned to Mrs. John.

Bessie gave her one queer little appalled glance, then bit her lip. "I have said everything that I have to say today." She bowed to Mr. Reid and beckoned to her husband. Aunt Blanche had certainly not played the game.

Mrs. Williston, flushed with her own cleverness, was almost ready to linger. But Walter Leaven, not Mr. Reid, took it upon himself to answer her.

"I don't know who Miss Bean is," he said coldly, "but I am quite sure she is not fit for Cordelia to live with. Certainly not if she was at Cordelia's house that day." The expression of his mouth seemed to dispose of Mrs. Williston both in this world and in the next. "I have

cabled to Huntingdon," he went on, turning to Mr. Reid. The others might listen if they chose, but he seemed not even to be aware of that. "Of course he'll look after her at that end — get her on to a ship. And I will meet her at San Francisco."

Mrs. Williston looked as if she wished to re-enter the conference, but Bessie John pushed her gently towards the door. Mrs. John did not even bow to Leaven as she left the office, but her husband, silently following her, stopped an instant and held out his hand to him. Leaven, taken by surprise, did not manage to grasp John's hand without awkwardness. You would have said that he found himself having an inexplicable little interlude with the furniture. But the hands met, somehow, and John and the two women got out.

"I am engaged, Boomer," said Mr.

Reid. The door was closed firmly, and the lawyer and Leaven faced each other intimately across the table.

IX

"YES, I'm in," Bessie John murmured to the echo of the maid's retreating footsteps, "but why in the world didn't you say I was out? Why don't you always say 'out' to Aunt Blanche? But one has to pay more for servants who can do that with the proper air. I wonder why? You'd think it was an easy accomplishment to acquire. Stella did it beautifully — she never made a mistake — but she wouldn't do a thing for the twinnies when Nurse was out, and she wanted her wages raised every month. A social sense below stairs comes very high. Nurse's social sense is all we can afford. I have to go without one, myself, to pay for hers. As for you, darling" — Philip John was in the room,

watching her idly as she prepared herself to descend — "you never had one, did you? Yours are the manners of the original theocracy. A Levite who married into one of the Lost Tribes. Shocking!"

She rubbed her chin on the top of his head as she passed him.

"I don't blame you for not wanting to see that dreadful old woman," he offered genially. "Want me to come down and help?"

"You don't help, Pilly-Winky." She shrugged her shoulders. "Aunt Blanche is afraid of you. She knows you're a Christian, and that you know she isn't. I mean, theology aside, you're the real thing; and, if you ask my opinion, I don't believe Aunt Blanche will get a look-in on the Day of Judgment."

"I fancy that's too hard on her. I don't think much of her mental proc-

esses, but she probably acts according to her lights."

"Then her light is a leaky gas-jet. Oh, of course, she doesn't know what a pig she is. But, you see, when you're about, she dimly discerns the sty. So she doesn't let herself go. And she's no fun at all unless she does. If I've got to see her, I want to get comedy out of it."

Mrs. John, still reluctant, lingered a little on the threshold.

"Why did you back her up, Bess?" The question was reminiscent; it referred to events of nearly a year before, when the Johns and at least one other had been very uncomfortable in Mr. Reid's office. But Bessie John had always known it would some day be asked, and she took time to answer it.

"I didn't, Philip. She backed me up. Which is a very different matter."

Then she went, for she did not care to discuss it further now. Bessie John had been miraculously preserved, at that time, from a serious disagreement with her husband; preserved, as she piously acknowledged to herself, by the startling intervention of Walter Leaven. He had driven them all violently forth from any participation in Miss Wheaton's affairs, had taken over the whole situation himself at once, so that their uncomfortable hour need positively never have been. He would permit no "subscriptions" even from the Johns or Mrs. Williston; and this information had been passed on to them so quickly by Mr. Reid that Bessie had never had to quarrel with her husband over the amount. No one knew, not even John, how grateful Bessie was to be relieved of such a necessity. She did not call Leaven a saint, but she was not far from thinking him

an angel. He had seemed to intervene, that is, supernaturally. Thanks to Leaven, they had only come to the brink of quarrelling; they had never had really to begin. Neither of them had ever been anxious to; and, as far as she could see, they never, never would have to, now.

Bessie was dressed in black, and she and Mrs. Williston sat sombrely opposite each other in the sea-captain's front parlor.

"Good of you to come out on a holiday, when your family must be wanting you at home," Bessie began, not too amiably.

Mrs. Williston shook her head. "I sometimes feel that I am a check on their high spirits. Their ways are not my ways."

"I should have thought they did their best." Bessie knew the reply was not the right one; but she was annoyed

that Aunt Blanche should have turned up on one of Philip's rare days of freedom.

Mrs. John's tone had been colorless enough, but Mrs. Williston scented prejudice in it. Irony she was incapable of recognizing — which may have been why Bessie John kept up the intimacy. With prices where they were, a wife and mother had to take her pleasure where she could get it cheapest.

"Bessie, I don't believe you know what I have to bear. I have no complaint to make — I am not a complaining person — but I am sensitive, and to have my most serious advice disregarded, completely disregarded . . ." Her handkerchief came out of her bag.

"Oh . . . they seem so courteous, Aunt Blanche." Her vivid memories of that slavish household forced the speech from her.

"Is this generation ever courteous? But, of course, I make allowances for that. I do not complain, I tell you — you will never find me complaining — but it is hard not to be loved by one's own. I pray you may never have it to bear." She shook her head, as if she had the vision of basely ungrateful grown-up twins. "They respect me, but I do not feel I have their confidence. I have to ask questions. . . . Sometimes I wonder if all I have done for them has been in vain. Have you ever noticed that the most unselfish persons get the least gratitude?"

"Yes, often." Bessie's voice was quite empty of irony this time.

"But that is not what I came to talk about," Mrs. Williston went on. "I feel it my duty to go and see Cordelia Wheaton. You know she is very ill. I have purposely kept away for a good

many weeks. When she first came back, I meant to see her often. I thought that the countenance of an old friend might be welcome. Especially an old friend who, if I do say it, has kept the respect of a modest and godly circle. I said to myself: 'Blanche Williston, isn't it your duty to go over into Macedonia and help?' It wasn't easy. I have grown used to working with sympathetic Christian souls — our board meetings are more like prayer-meetings, Bessie, than mere business occasions. But I said: perhaps it is *too* pleasant for me, *too* easy where I am; perhaps I ought to go into the outer darkness and find Cordelia. And I tried. I made my sacrifices. I refused the chairmanship of the executive committee of our new church auxiliary to the Liberian Religious Aid, because I felt that at any time of the day or night I might be called on to

wrestle for Cordelia's soul. . . . And besides, Bessie" — she bent forward, almost whispering — "I said to myself: that poor misguided creature shall know that there is one respectable woman who does not avoid her; who goes to her, as a friend, in broad daylight."

"But what *do* you mean, Aunt Blanche?" Mrs. John had not seen Mrs. Williston for some time, to be sure, but certainly it would take decades to brew a scandal about poor, broken Cordelia Wheaton.

"Why, surely you knew, Bessie. Miss Bean would have taken her in, I believe, if she had been well paid. They could have done light housekeeping somewhere. It was what I originally suggested, if you remember. I don't know how long it would have lasted, but it would have been a step in the right direction. But

Cordelia's evil genius stepped in and took her to himself. Surely you knew, Bessie — if you did not, you have been very remiss — that for three months Cordelia has been living with Mr. Leaven."

"Oh, that!" Bessie John gave a light sigh of disappointment. "Why, naturally I've known that, ever since it happened. I thought you were talking about a scandal. 'Why have you got such big teeth, grandmother?' "

Mrs. Williston glared at her silently.

"It's out of 'Red Riding Hood,' Aunt Blanche." Bessie grew impatient. "I mean, I honestly thought for a minute that Miss Wheaton had given you some reason to be shocked. I didn't know but she had thrown a bronze Buddha at you."

"Do you mean to tell me, Bessie John, that you think Cordelia Wheaton

should live with a man she is not married to?"

Mrs. John regarded her caller with open mouth. Then she began to giggle. The giggle grew on her, turned to an hysterical laugh. It was a moment or two before she could speak. Mrs. Williston had never recovered from the glare, and now the glare showed signs of intensifying itself. Bessie John put up a hand to plead for silence until she was fit to speak.

"Why — why — Aunt Blanche!" she cried feebly. "Do you mean to tell me that you think there is anything shocking in that? Why, they're both on the edge of the grave."

"So am I on the edge of the grave, as you so politely put it, Bessie. But I think you would be shocked if I went to live with Walter Leaven."

Mrs. John's newly won gravity forsook

her. She giggled again. "So I should, Aunt Blanche. Awfully shocked. I should think you were Messalina, no less. You must admit that, when you've appeared to hate him so many years, it would give rise to the gravest suspicions — clandestine meetings no longer to be borne: all that sort of thing. I should get out a warrant at once and hurry you off to do light housekeeping with old Miss Bean."

"You have a very unpleasant vein of humor, Bessie."

"So I have. So I have. Forgive me, Aunt Blanche." Mrs. John wiped her eyes in sign of contrition. "But I think it would dry up without you. . . . Only, seriously, why can't you put all that silly stuff out of your head?"

Mrs. Williston's reply was unexpectedly mild. "I don't say there is anything *wrong*, Bessie. I sincerely hope there

isn't. But I do not believe in defying the laws of God and man. I should suppose they were both past the temptations of youth. But what reason is there, except human perversity, for their not marrying?"

"About a hundred, I should imagine, Aunt Blanche. In the first place, it would look so silly. In the second, there's Miss Wheaton's religion, isn't there? And in the third place, who in the world knows or cares? I think it's quite delightful of them."

"I shouldn't have expected you to find *three* immoral reasons for defending them, Bessie."

Mrs. John shook herself together and spoke seriously. "I'm not immoral, as you well know. I merely think it's awfully unimportant. Miss Wheaton weighs three hundred pounds, and she's slowly dying. As for Mr. Leaven, he's not a

man, in that sense: he's a very well executed bronze. I think it's too bad of you to worry. It's just because they have so little, either of them, to do with the world, the flesh, and the devil that they are so touching. For I find them touching. So does Philip, even more than I do. And Phil is six times as moral as any of us. Cheer up! I know you've taken a perverted sort of pleasure in thinking how unconventional they are, but a woman of your worldly experience knows there's *nothing in it.* I wouldn't bother with Miss Wheaton, if I were you. I'd go for Liberia with both hands and both feet. I dare say it does shock you a little" — she relented to that extent — "but you've really only to put your mind on it to see that there are other things that need your mind more."

Mrs. Williston gathered up her furs for departure. "I came to ask if you

wouldn't call on Cordelia with me," she began, "but I don't think you are in the mood to go."

"No, I couldn't go with you to-day. I will some time, perhaps. But I want to say one thing." She leaned forward. "If you go and insult that poor old lady, you'll be doing a very unkind thing. I truly hope you won't. I believe she's hardly aware of this world at all. Don't you go poking it in her face." She put a caressing tone into her voice that redeemed her speech from impertinence.

"It is always the business of a Christian woman —" began Mrs. Williston.

Mrs. John stood up and folded her arms, looking down on her visitor. "Umph! Let's get rid of this," she muttered. "Aunt Blanche, answer me one question. Why didn't you make some protest when Mr. Reid first told you?

That was the time to stop it — before it had happened. You didn't say a word, then, about the laws either of God or of man."

"I was bewildered, Bessie. I was hurt that my advice was scorned. For the moment I was helpless."

"*You were relieved*, Aunt Blanche." The words came quietly, like a verdict. "We all were, for we were all in the same boat. You were so glad to be ordered off the premises that you didn't dare open your lips for fear they would say 'Thank God!' It's only now — now that you know that Walter Leaven wouldn't let one of us touch Cordelia Wheaton if he had to poison us on the threshold — that you let yourself think of such things. If you really think them, you ought to move heaven and earth to take her away. Nothing would induce you to take her away, even if she'd come. There-

fore you ought to be silent. I don't blame you for being willing to leave her where she is, but as long as you do you'll have to let scandal alone."

"I will offer to take her away, if you think that right." Mrs. Williston was spurred to self-defence.

Mrs. John shook her head. "Too cheap and easy, Aunt Blanche. She's going to die where she is. You wouldn't offer if you thought they'd listen to you. No: that doesn't let you out. It's got to stop."

"Do you think I would spread such a thing?"

"Wouldn't trust you a bit, my dear" (Bessie's voice was honey, with a taint of aloes), "if you once got the bit in your teeth. But I think you'll presently see that you'd only get yourself laughed at — or perhaps very, very severely criticised." Then Bessie John condescended

to imitate the augurs. "Aunt Blanche, Walter Leaven has saved all our faces. You and I may know we were right; but he is making it possible for us to look pretty. Don't spoil it."

"I don't feel pretty — letting one of my oldest friends do such an extraordinary thing. It is bound to reflect on me, when people come to realize. For I shall always keep up with Cordelia," she finished austerely.

"You *are* brave, Aunt Blanche. You trust in God and keep your powder dry, don't you?" Bessie asked irrelevantly. "But whether you think you look pretty or not, I can tell you that you would have looked downright ugly if Miss Wheaton were starving on Miss Bean's light housekeeping. So should I. And I'm very grateful for not having to look ugly. We should have had perfectly good consciences, both of us; but it is

very pleasant to have Walter Leaven preserve our complexions as well."

Mrs. Williston so obviously made no headway with the metaphor that Mrs. John changed the subject.

"It's perfectly all right, so long as you don't mix up in it," she declared. "Of course, it will be a great relief when Miss Wheaton dies ——"

"Bessie!" Mrs. Williston was on very intimate terms with death in the abstract, but she was incapable of mentioning the demise of an individual save with proper deprecation.

"Well, won't it? When she's got to suffer as she probably has? Do you suppose it's very gay for her — or for him, either? Oh, well, let's not discuss it further. . . . I really can't go with you to-day, Aunt Blanche. But I'll pay my respects some time along. The twins have had whooping-cough, you

know. I've been very much occupied at home."

Mrs. Williston rose. "I shouldn't have wanted you in any case, Bessie. Not after the light way you have been talking. You didn't talk that way about your friend — the little artist-girl."

"Oh, Julie Fort? No, I didn't. But there's all the difference in the world, you see. Miss Wheaton has done nothing. The very idea is too grotesque. Only your Gothic mind could harbor it. Whereas, Julie has done — everything."

"Is all her money gone?" Mrs. Williston hovered ghoulishly on the threshold.

"So I heard. The man she ran off with had a little, I believe."

"Are they married? Was there a child?"

But Bessie John's patience was outworn. "No, there was no child. I heard

that they had quarrelled. I heard a lot of horrid things. I don't want to discuss Julie, Aunt Blanche. It's all too unpleasant."

"Does Cordelia know?" The ghoul would not go.

"Why should she? And if you tell her" — Bessie John threw her head back — "then *I'll tell.*"

"Tell what?" Mrs. Williston's voice was sharp.

"Your family — about your annuity."

"My annuity? What do you mean?"

Mrs. John folded her arms and stood very straight. "I admit that it's only a shrewd guess. But I have put a lot of things together, and I'm pretty sure. Anyhow, your family could jolly well find out — and they would."

She loathed such talk, really; but, most of all just then, she loathed Aunt Blanche.

"All I mean is that Miss Wheaton is to be left in peace." The words were firm, but she ended with a tired sigh.

"If you think it would grieve Cordelia . . ."

"I see you get me, Aunt Blanche. Good-bye." And this time Bessie turned her back. But she rang for the parlor-maid, and saw, across the twilight of the big room, the servant go with Mrs. Williston to her cab.

"Woo-oof!" she murmured as she saw the cab drive away. There was immeasurable disgust in her tone.

"Philip!" He loomed at the top of the staircase as she mounted. "Next time I will let you come down. Or rather, if Annie can't learn always to say 'out' to Aunt Blanche, she'll have to go. New York might as well have open sewers as to have that woman at large."

Arm in arm they went back into Bessie's room.

"What's the trouble?"

"She wants to start a scandal about poor old Miss Wheaton."

"Miss Wheaton? But —" Philip John burst into laughter.

"That's what I told her. But I had to threaten her in the end."

"How did you manage it?"

"Told her I'd accuse her, to her family, of an annuity."

"But you don't know if she has one."

"I didn't. But I do now. Because she crumbled at once. And I hinted to her that we all had good cause to be grateful to Walter Leaven. She ended by wanting to know all about Julie Fort — that little rotter."

"Did you tell her the girl had gone utterly to the bad?"

"Not precisely. That is, I didn't

ravish her ears with any details. I simply couldn't: they would have delighted the old woman so. Her mouth was the greediest thing, while she waited."

"You know I don't believe, Bess" — John meditated amid smoke-spirals — "that your delightful Aunt Blanche really has pornographic tastes. I don't understand you: you 'Aunt Blanche' her, and then you call her the devil in person."

"Pornographic tastes? Um — perhaps not. She'd be just as pleased with delirium tremens. That's why I hate reformers: they have such catholic lusts. Any evil, almost, will satisfy them. Of course, if the world weren't rotten, they'd lose their blessed jobs, and they know it. Aunt Blanche isn't capable of anything *except* reforming the world. I never saw a reformer yet who would be trusted

to do anything in a world that was decent already. They'd be supported by the state as incompetents. Aunt Blanche couldn't make herself normally useful in any capacity whatever: she hasn't the wit. Therefore she is given the thunderbolts of Jove to play with."

"As usual, my dear girl, you're far too sweeping."

"Of course I am. No fun, if you don't state your position with violence. . . . But I told her she ought to get down on her knees to old Walter Leaven," Bessie finished resolutely.

"Why?" Philip John was quiet and curious.

"Because" — Bessie drew a deep breath of effort — "because he saved our faces."

"Ah?"

"Yes, Philip. I always meant to say that to you. That's all I mean, by the

way. I was right, and I should have stuck to it. I would never have done one bit more than I planned to do that day in Mr. Reid's office. Never. But it wouldn't have looked nice. No, it wouldn't. I can't agree with you any farther than that. But just so far, I do. Thank heaven, it isn't an issue now. But probably I owe it to you to say that, to that extent — it isn't very far, by the way — I'm with you. I don't want to discuss it — not ever, Philip. Not now, even. We'll drop it right there."

John searched her eyes with his own. "Right there? Sure you don't want to go a little farther?"

"Perfectly sure. So sure that I'm inordinately grateful to Mr. Leaven. It would have been beastly for both of us."

"Why isn't it still rather beastly, if we don't agree?"

"Because we don't have to discuss it. And on every other point in the world we do agree, don't we? So we can drop it out of sight — like Catholics who marry Protestants and live happily ever after. Some do, you know."

Philip John smiled, very gently and tolerantly. Then he let the whole question slip forever into the limbo of events that never come to birth.

"It would make me very miserable to quarrel with you, Bess. I'm with you in hoping we shall never have to. After all, married folk can't afford it."

"And 'after all' " — she pleaded with him a little — "is there any honor in human relations more vital than the honor of marriage and of parenthood? If there is, I can't see it, that's all."

Philip John patted her hand gently, but did not reply. Bessie, too, hushed her instinct for perfection, swathing it

in a rich robe of compromise. That was all she could do, she saw quite clearly. And who should say the richness of the robe was not, in its way, true homage to the sleeping creature? Well — so far as she could contrive it, the sleeping creature should lie in state. She returned the pressure of her husband's hand. "I'm going up to the nursery," she said. "Better come along."

X

THE view from Walter Leaven's rooms grew, in a sense, more sordid as spring advanced. The windows of the poor, hermetically sealed in winter, opened as the cold moderated. Heads and mattresses, milk bottles and green groceries, peopled the window-sills anew. Here and there, through larger openings, machinery and its servants were revealed to him. But he found his repayment in a lifted sky, remoter, bluer, and in a freer air, friendly, not yet grown brutal with heat.

He had rented a third room, across the hall, to go with his own two — a cheerless little apartment that never held a tenant long. Of this he made his own bedroom, furnishing his former

chamber for Cordelia Wheaton. When he learned from Jim Huntingdon's long cablegram that Miss Wheaton was really ill, he had gone about his feverish arrangements. He did not know in what shape he might find her, but he took it that he was to receive her from Huntingdon at San Francisco, and to bring her home to die of her slow heart-affection — without, he hoped, too much pain. Leaven had told Mr. Reid, on the very day of the abortive conference, that Cordelia's support was to be his affair and his only. She might be given to understand what Mr. Reid liked, but not a penny should come to her from any of that crew.

"Of course, I should have given most of it myself," Reid had growled, "but I wasn't going to tell them so."

"I know, I know. I should have been sure of it. But this is exclusively my

affair," Leaven had replied quietly. The lawyer knew a resolve when he saw one, and he did not attempt to change Leaven's mind. That was a mineral substance, not easily impressed.

When Leaven received Cordelia from Huntingdon's kind, impatient hands, he saw how well he had guessed. It was plain that Cordelia must be accompanied through the remaining months; that her vagueness must find guiding hands on every side. The shred of her wealth that he possessed (though he had kept it intact, like a relic) would not suffice to such a household as she would need if the guiding hands were to be mercenary ones. Nor should the hands be those of the old sempstress Mrs. Williston had mentioned — irreverent, with claws inset. . . . Yes, he would take her to himself. He would bring her home, with no flourish, with a quiet

taking for granted of the situation which must convince. Luckily — he had time to learn, in the few hours between Huntingdon's arrival and his return, by another ship, to the passionate and sacred continent — Miss Wheaton was aware of her own physical condition. An American doctor in Hong Kong had looked her over and reported explicitly. He had only to provide for her comfort as relentlessly and uncommunicatively as a trained nurse.

He had brought her, then, to his high-perched rooms, but not as a burden; as if, rather, the rooms had been merely waiting through her exile; as if the crowded objects had been heirlooms of her own. A little maid-servant came in by day to wait on Cordelia and fetch and serve her food. It was like purveying for a crippled bird: a little water, a few grains of corn. Leaven stuck to his

dreary boarding-house. A nurse slept at night in the big sitting-room.

And what of Cordelia Wheaton? Leaven himself could not guess what lay beneath her quietness. Not once had she questioned; not once had she protested; and he hardly knew whether she had cynically grasped the situation, or whether she was too sunk in fatalism to wonder — or whether she merely had incomparably good manners. Whichever it was, it was clear that she trusted him; that she was willing, if not content, to let him be her go-between with the world. Did the gray hue of death strike inward to her very heart? He could not say. He drew her sometimes to talk of life in Benares, its strange mingling of conventual and private mysticism; but she was unready with detail, over-dainty, it seemed, for concreteness. Faint implications of a point of view were

there; hints of hierarchies no Occidental could recognize, and yet of a democracy positively biologic, which ignored not only classes but species. She did not preach; she only assumed and, ever so faintly, alluded. "Snake and man" — thus he had once summed up her blasphemy against civilization. Yet how gracefully she avoided insulting his humanism, save with the deep crease of her smile! She was a very great lady, in spite of all. Sometimes they drifted into reminiscence; like a pedlar, he would pull something out of the pack of their past and try to catch her eye with its glitter. But her effort was too painful: chronology fretted her like a lie not to be borne. She had already pricked the fallacy of time; soon she would have done with that of space.

Her heart grew weaker as the spring came on, as if justifiably revolting against

the burden of flesh it must vitalize. Leaven gave sharp directions to the doctor to save her pain. He suspected too vividly what she thought of pain! Moreover, for him, it was the arch-enemy. He wished her to float out on a stream of diffused consciousness — which should widen to unconsciousness at the last, as a river widens to the sea. He craved for her all possible amenities of dissolution. He did not even ask her to welcome the spring as it floated in through their wide-flung windows. He only hugged to himself the fitness of her dying in a gentler air. He conspired with nurse and physician for opiates cunningly spaced, that there should be no agonies, that she should slip from one oblivion of pain into the next. Cordelia sat in her great chair, pillowed and propped into the semblance of antediluvian bulk, an object so monstrous as to take his

breath away when he entered after an absence; vast, shapeless, white, like a primeval foreshadowing of the human race to be. Yet her voice, when it came, was sweet, and her eyes kind as no other eyes had ever been.

It was not the way he had dreamed of having Cordelia, in the days when he had dreamed and his heart was not sapless or his face like burnt-out slag. (Not bronze, as Bessie John had said, since bronze has blood within.) Yet Walter Leaven was happier to have her thus than he could have been to have her any time these thirty years. He had forgotten now the long ache of empty hands. It had been vouchsafed him, before she died, to serve her: to appease a lifelong craving, long since grown formal, yet still there as a sense of incompleteness, of a step in the dance not taken. His relation to her was all

piety and old convention; as empty of passion as the beautiful genuflections of an acolyte.

Suddenly, one afternoon in mid-March, she spoke to him very shyly. "You loved me, didn't you, Walter?"

"I have always loved you."

"But not now?" she asked anxiously.

"No — not now."

And she closed her eyes, reassured.

The little passage was not grotesque to Walter Leaven, for he understood.

It had been months now since any one had been admitted to Cordelia except the doctor and the nurses. Mr. Reid, Mrs. John, Mrs. Williston, Miss Bean — all of them had been turned away and now came no more. Cordelia asked no questions about her beneficiaries. It caressed some surviving vanity in Leaven that the only human

relation she should have referred to spontaneously was his to her. The others were lost in that mist of kindness which was settling each day a little more impenetrably upon her soul. For it was a mist, through which the lamps shone ever fainter and fewer. Morphine took care of that, since a point of light would now be a point of pain.

April was a veiled month. The sun rode higher and more kindly, and Leaven, as I have said, could see from his windows life returning to the world. But within the grayness deepened. The sound of that difficult breathing kept on through the days and nights, incessant, natural as a hidden watercourse close at hand. When Leaven went forth into the streets, he missed it at the heart of the din. He was neither impatient nor sad. He would not have hastened or delayed Cordelia's death

by the lifting of a secret finger. She must not suffer: of that he would make sure. But the thought of her passing brought no relief. He was consciously under no strain. What he had wanted had been vouchsafed him; and the months would not add to the gift. Nothing else, ever in all his life, could happen to him now.

Yet when the doctor told him the next days would see the end, he bestirred himself a little from his peace. He must be there at hand, every moment, lest in some last lucid instant she should wish to speak to him. He knew that the final unconsciousness would come before the heart stopped beating, and he drugged himself with coffee that he might not sleep at all. The doctor's advice to him he brushed aside as he would have rejected a spurious painting. He sat for hours, listening

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to the raucous familiar breathing, watching her closed eyelids.

On this day of late April, the sun was driving a level band of light through the western windows. He motioned to the nurse not to draw the curtain. The light was not yet upon Miss Wheaton's face, and something in his tradition craved sunlight for her at the end. As he bent over her, never taking his eyes from her closed eyelids, his mind went straying a little. He thought of the beneficiaries — all those people to whom this woman here had given the key of the fields. He was glad they would not know the moment of her passing — that they were so utterly barred out from knowledge of her. Then it came to him, with a slow insistent rush of conviction, that he himself was still in Cordelia's debt. Nothing he had done for her in this season of slow dying could equal

the beauty of her complete abandoning of herself to his care. She had not troubled him with thanks, with questions, with deprecations. She had not even — oh, blessed abstention! — stated her case. She had taken him as simply as one takes God. She had been beautiful, that is, without intention; because to the very core of her, no matter what grotesqueries of creed overlaid her spirit, as grotesqueries of flesh overlaid her pure heart, she trusted him. She was unconscious of charity, whether hers or his, thereby creating a charity that he could never match.

Never? The sun placed its wide finger of light upon her eyes. They opened into what must have been, to her relaxed vision, a great golden mist. Some early irrelevant moment of her life resumed her in her weakness.

"Heaven?" she murmured.

Leaven bent his face close to hers, passionately careful not to touch her or to intercept the sun.

"Nirvâna," he murmured back, with a lingering clearness. "Nirvâna." It was with no passion of sympathy, no blur of emotion, that he spoke. Leaven had never been colder than when he grasped, ostensibly, the hoarded sum of his contempt and flung it down there in the sunlight, to pay his debt. "Nirvâna," he repeated, deliberate, insistent as a mesmerist.

The faintest smile, as if some little, some infinitesimal thing had been set straight, brushed across Cordelia's mouth. The sacrifice of his lips' integrity had not been made in vain. She had touched and remitted. . . . Then her eyes closed again, and the nurse, at a gesture from him, drew down the shade.

An hour later, in the twilight, the head dropped, and the breathing, long since almost inaudible, turned to silence. The nurse nodded; and Leaven rose.

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